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level. 14+
Things Cannot Remain the Same

Spring of Fantasy and Ash

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Things Cannot Remain the Same

Written by: Ao Jyumonji
Illustrations by: Eiri Shirai

*"Master, is bein' with
Yume unpleasant for you?"
"N-No, it's not."*

Master hid the bottom half of his face,
then, on top of that, he turned away.
"...Of course it's not, you dummy."

Here in Grimgar, volunteer soldier
trainees had to undergo basic
training in order to join a guild.
That training was extremely
harsh—supposedly.

*"Yume's not gonna be runnin'
away, though. 'Cause bein'
with Master's fun."*



I couldn't bring myself to like
this boisterous atmosphere.
I felt like I was out of place in it.



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ex.1

Farewell, Beloved

Gobliger

Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash

Level. Fourteen Plus

Presented by Ao jyumonji / Illustration by Eiri shirai

“Awaken.”

I opened my eyes, feeling like I'd heard someone's voice.

"Hey. What're you sleeping for, dumbass? Are you a moron? Well, are you? You are, aren't you? You're such a moron. I mean, you're trash, too. I get it, I get it. You're a hopeless piece of trash. I know that better than anyone."

For some reason, I was suddenly getting dissed.

Hold on.

Why?

What for?

Where was I lying? I could see the sky.

It looked like I'd been sleeping. And I'd woken up. That much, I understood.

But still.

What was this?

The guy who'd just finished dissing me like crazy crouched down, looked at me, and said...

"...Man."

"Huh?" I said, dumbfounded.

His skin was a greenish-yellow, his nose low and smushed, with fang-like teeth protruding from a mouth that looked like a gaping wound. His ears were huge. He was, yeah, to be blunt—hideous.

The wispy excuse for hair growing out of the top of his head was curly, like a natural perm, and that pissed me off, too.

Well, ignoring the curly hair for a moment, I had more important questions.

"Man, you're a goblin?" I asked.

"Huh?" The curly-haired goblin's face distorted with irritation and his head cocked to the side. "Of course I am, duh. You're a goblin, too, man."

"Huh?" I raised my hands, bringing them in front of my face. I couldn't believe what I was seeing. "What are... these hands?"

These hands.

My hands.

They really were green.



My arms, too. They were kind of weird. Sort of scrawny.

This was wrong. All of it.

“What? Something the matter? Well, you always were a stupid piece of trash, man.” The curly-haired goblin mussed his own curly hair, turning to look behind him. “Hey, *Gobuhiro* woke up!”

“...Gobuhiro?”

No, hold on, that wasn’t my name—or was it?

Huh?

What was my name, if that wasn’t it?

Calm down. My name. It was my own name; I had to know this. There was no way I wouldn’t.

Pressing a hand against my chest, I took a deep breath.

Now, I just had to say my own name as it came into my head.

Okay.

“Gobu...hiro.”

Seriously?

While I was still in shock, some other goblins rushed over. Naturally (?), as might be expected (?), all of them were goblins.

It was a gob of goblins.

There were one... two... three... four goblins, not counting the curly-haired goblin.

No, I was a goblin, too, so, there were four, plus me, plus the curly-haired goblin, making it five... six goblins, huh.

There were nothing but goblins.

No, wait?

One of them was awfully big for a goblin. No goblin should have been that big, so he wasn’t a goblin.

A hobgoblin, huh?

He was wearing rather heavy equipment, too. Was it because he was a hobgoblin? I didn't even know anymore.

"Gobuhiro...?" A goblin with strangely silky hair and a clean face, for a goblin at least, but who was still unquestionably a goblin, leaned over my (goblin) face to get a closer look at me. "Are you okay?"

"Huh? Uhh... Yeah. Sure..."

I wished he wouldn't call me Gobuhiro like it was natural, but I was, in fact, Gobuhiro, so these people (goblins) had no choice but to call me that. While those sorts of thoughts swirled through my head, I (a goblin) sat up.

"I'm fine... I guess," I said. "Yeah. Fine... I think, Gobuto."

"You are? Well, good."

Even though he was a goblin, Gobuto's smile was awfully refreshing.

—*Hold on.*

Did I call him Gobuto just now?

Gobuto gently clapped me on the shoulder. Even though he was a goblin.

"I know you push yourself too hard sometimes, Gobuhiro. If there's anything wrong, I hope you'll tell me."

"Ha ha... I don't think there is, though..."

I seriously didn't think there was, but maybe I was pushing myself, just a bit...?

He'd said he wanted me to tell him, so I could, or rather I wanted to, but how was I supposed to explain this? When I woke up, there was a goblin right next to me? And I was a goblin? And there were other goblins, too?

"Nyuh? Is somethin' wrong, Gobu-kun?"

"No, it's nothing, Yumelin..."

Yumelin?

The goblin with the long hair, who was carrying a bow and had crouched

down next to me, was Yumelin? Yeah, that was right. It was Yumelin. When I asked myself what her name was again, I only got the same answer as before. Yumelin. This female goblin was Yumelin.

I knew Yumelin was Yumelin, but I couldn't help but feel something was off. What was it that was off, though? That I couldn't say.

"Are you really... all right?" asked the female goblin behind Yumelin.

That female goblin behind Yumelin, the one wearing the pointy hat... I knew her, too. The staff-like stick she was clutching, and that timidity of hers, were familiar.

"I'm fine. Just fine," I said. "I'm fine... Okay?"

However, there might have been something wrong. No, not just something, I couldn't shake the doubt that everything was wrong here.

I spoke her name, as if confirming it for myself. "*Shiholin*."

"Th-That's... good then..."

"...Heheh." I laughed despite myself.

I'd known it.

It was Shiholin.

Of course. I mean, she was Shiholin.

The one who trudged up next, the big hobgoblin who wasn't a goblin, he was...

"E-Erm... G-Good morning, Gobuhiro-kun."

"Yeah... Good morning... *Hobuzo*."

I knew it.

I very clearly knew. About Hobuzo.

No matter how I thought about it, there was nothing wrong.

I, Gobuhiro, was here, and Gobuto was here, and so were Yumelin, and Shiholin, and Hobuzo, and finally Gobuta.

Five goblins, and one hobgoblin. Six people in total.

“Was I having a weird dream?” I murmured to myself.

“Hoeh?” Yumelin cocked her head to the side. “Just now, Gobu-kun, did you call Yumelin?”

“No, I did not. I mean, listen, Yumelin, if you call me Gobu-kun, everyone but Hobuzo could be Gobu-kun, so I’m not sure that works. I get the feeling I’ve said this before, though...”

“Oh, wow. You did? You were tellin’ Yumelin that before?”

“I feel like I did... Or maybe I didn’t... Hmm...”

“Well, it’s just like you’re sayin’, Gobu-kun. Ah, Yumelin went and called you Gobu-kun again. Sorry, Gobu-kun. Ah.”

“Do you have, like, zero capacity for learning, Yumelin?! I mean, seriously!” Gobuta shouted.

“Shove off, Gobuta! Yumelin doesn’t want to be hearin’ that from you! You’re just a Gobuta, Gobuta!”

“I’m a what now?! I don’t get it! I don’t get anything you say!”

This scene of Gobuta and Yumelin bickering was familiar, too.

I couldn’t work out what was up yet, but I was here, and this was where I belonged, and yet I was thinking it felt off somehow. That was a bit strange of me. Still, I couldn’t help but feel that way.

Shaking my head, I looked around.

The walls were collapsing. The floor was rotten, and the grassy ground underneath was exposed. Only, like, a fifth of the ceiling was left. The blue of the sky stung my eyes.

It felt like a ruin. That was because these were, in fact, ruins.

“Hmph...” Gobuta leaned back against the wall, crossing his arms. “Still, though. This place, it’s seriously rough. Like, even worse than I’d heard...”

When Gobuta said that in a self-mocking manner, Shiholin shrunk her neck into her body, seeming ashamed for some reason, and Hobuzo sat down in dejection.

“It looks like the place hasn’t been maintained in a while,” Gobuto said with a shrug. “It’s certainly a lot different from before. But, well, maybe it’s all in how we look at it?”

“How we look at it?” Gobuta echoed with a snort. “How are we supposed to look at this?”

“It’s a good place for a fresh start, wouldn’t you say?”

“*How?!?*”

“F-From zero!” Shiholin suddenly exclaimed. “I-If... you look at it... I-like we’re starting over, from zero... I mean, we actually have nothing...”

“Zero, huh.” Yume chewed on her index finger, puffing up one cheek as she did. “But, you know, Yumelin’s thinkin’ maybe what we had back there wasn’t better than nothin’. Though, if you’re gonna ask what’s worse than nothin’, Yumelin doesn’t know.”

“Y-Yeah...” Hobuzo was drawing on the ground with his fat fingers. “For, well... orphans, like us... we’re in a bad position back there. I mean, we had no position at all...”

I looked up to the sky again. The color of the sky was, obviously, no different in the New City than it was here in the Old City.

Or it shouldn’t have been.

But somehow, it looked totally different.

Like the sky here was faded, you could say.

I really got that sense of, *Ohh, how we’ve fallen...*

It was something we chose for ourselves.

For us goblins, the most important thing was the blood of our fathers. For the hobgoblins that coexisted with us, that was no different. When we gave our names, first we gave the name of our bloodline. Whether we had inherited a name from our fathers or not. That was what decided most, though not everything, about our lives.

If a goblin or hobgoblin had five or ten wives, and each of them gave birth to

children, not all of them could inherit the bloodline name.

As for the father's financial power—well, blood relations came into play here, too. It was basically a question of how good their blood was. If they had five children, maybe one or two could inherit the bloodline name. They were chosen based on divination, appearance, or how good or bad the birth mother was. Only the ones given the bloodline name were acknowledged as his true children.

The rest became orphans.

No matter how wealthy they were, or how good their blood, it was rare for some benevolent goblin to take in orphans. Once they were weaned, they were thrown out of their father's house.

That was why I, for instance, didn't even know my own parents' faces. Gobuta said he didn't, either, and Shiholin and Hobuzo only knew their mothers.

Yumelin was an orphan born to orphans. Gobuto never talked about his situation, so there may have been something up there.

Regardless, an orphan was an orphan.

"Well, yeah," Gobuta said, putting his hand on a hole in the wall. "Even if we stayed back there, we'd just be forced to work for free until we eventually bit it. There's nothing here, and we can't even feed ourselves properly, but we'll at least be able to choose where we die. ...Oh? Did I just say something cool? That was cool just now, right? Right?"

"Not particularly..." I muttered.

"Shut up, Gobupirooo! Can a lame-o like you judge my coolness?! Hell no, you moron!"

"Ha... ha ha..." Hobuzo rubbed his stomach. "B-But... first we have to take care of, you know, getting something to eat..."

There was a loud growl from Yumelin's stomach. "Ohhh! It's really rumblin'!"

"Food..." As for Shiholin, depending on how you looked at her, she might have seemed ready to die of starvation at any moment.

"Food, huh..." I looked to Gobuto, despite myself.

“It’s okay.” Gobuto accepted my gaze, and despite being a goblin, he grinned. “It’ll work out somehow. Let’s all figure it out together.”

1. A Tale to be Told

“Uh, nyuh, nyuh, nyuh, nyuh...” Drawing her bowstring back all the way, *sproing*, Yumelin let it loose. “Mrrowr!”

Whoosh, the arrow flew.

The solitary crow, sitting up in a high place was—not struck by the arrow. There was a flutter of wings as the crow took off.

The arrow, meanwhile, didn’t even reach the crow’s perch, losing velocity and plummeting to the ground.

“...Noo-hyoo.” Yumelin slumped her shoulders.

I don’t know... I couldn’t find the words to console her. Honestly, I was nowhere near as disappointed as Yumelin. It didn’t feel like a near miss, after all.

If you were to ask me if, for even for a second, I’d believed she might hit, then no. No, I had not.

Also, I was so hungry that I felt sluggish.

This was rough.

It was getting pretty bad.

“Heh, heh, heh, heh...” Gobuta was spreadeagled. “You suck... Heh, heh, heh, heh, heh...”

“Don’t say Yumelin sucks!” Yumelin said, half-crying. “Yumelin, she’s givin’ it her best, okay? She’s not good at shootin’ with a bow, so it’s not her fault! If you’re gonna say Yumelin sucks, you do it instead, Gobuta!”

“...Screw that. I don’t wanna move... Also, stop shouting... It’s not good when your stomach’s empty...”

“Fuh, gyuh. Gyuh, gyuh, gyuh!” At last, Yumelin’s anger exploded—only it didn’t, and she deflated there. “...Ooh-hyoooh. So hungry...”

I get you, I thought.

I honestly, seriously, sincerely understood.

Geez. I couldn't even bring myself to blame Gobuta. I lacked the will. I might not have been lying down like Gobuta, but at some point I'd squatted down, and I hadn't gotten back up since.

It wasn't just me; Hobuzo was also sitting down, looking up at the sky, unmoving. Shiholin was crouching. Even Gobuto— "A crow isn't going to be enough," I murmured.

But he was Gobuto, after all. Gobuto stood right up, fist thrust upwards in manly fashion. "Even if you could shoot down the crow, it wouldn't be enough to fill our bellies. A crow isn't enough. We need to find different prey!"

"No, but..." I started to argue back, which actually surprised me. "What should we do? I mean, in the Old City, there are... orphans like us... or crows, and that's about it. There might be rats, too..."

"Is it time for *that*?" Gobuta's throat made a strange gurgling sound. "Is it time for cannibalism...? I mean... they do it, right...? The guys here in the Old City...? I wouldn't blame them..."

"Gooobliiin..." Hobuzo whispered to himself. It was a scary voice, like we were hearing it come from the depths of the earth.

Looking over, Hobuzo's eyes were bloodshot, with the whites showing, and there was drool running from his mouth. There was no kidding around here; he was in a seriously dangerous state.

"Anything but that..." Shiholin's shoulders trembled. "Anything but that, no... As goblins... we have to do anything but that..."

"Ohhhh...." Yumelin was casting a heated glance in Shiholin's direction. "Now that you're mentionin' it, for a while now, Yumelin's been thinkin' Shiholin looks mighty tasty..."

"Eek!" Shiholin jumped back.

"No, no!" Gobuto said with, probably forced, cheer in his voice. "We're obviously not resorting to cannibalism. That's our last resort—no, I'm kidding,

okay? Kidding. That's not it. What I want to say is, I don't think there's any need for us to stay put here in the Old City."

"Whaa...?" Gobuta looked at Gobuto with vacant eyes. "No, but... we came all this way. We left the New City, so going back'd be..."

"I never said anything about going back."

"Huh? If we're not going back, where..."

"Not back..." I said, blinking.

"Where, then...?" Shiholin asked, blinking. "Could you... mean?"

"Nuhoh...?" Maybe copying Shiholin, Yume looked off into the distance.

"Ohhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh..." Hobuzo was groaning.

Gobuto nodded firmly. "Outside. We'll go outside Damuro. I'm sure you know all know this, but there's a whole wide world outside Damuro."

"But still..." I hung my head. "Isn't it dangerous? Outside, I mean. Not that I'd really know. There are, like, humans, and orcs, and stuff..."

"Gobuhiro. We haven't run into any, but humans come here to the Old City, too."

"That's... Well, yeah, I've heard the stories."

"But there're apparently no orcs anywhere near Damuro. They're much further away, in some area called Nananka or Ishmal. That's where the orcs and the undead live."

"Gobuto, you..." Gobuta looked slightly abashed. "You really know your stuff. Where'd you hear all that?"

"Well, a little from here, a little from there." Gobuta said with a smile that felt refreshing, even though he was a goblin.

I narrowed my eyes, thinking, *He's a mysterious guy*, all over again.

We were all orphans, but there was something different about Gobuto. He was awfully knowledgeable, for instance, and calm, too. Ever since we first met, he had been like that.

Maybe Gobuto wasn't really an orphan? Couldn't he be a respectable goblin, with a bloodline name?

But that wasn't possible. If he weren't an orphan, there's no way he'd be with us. If he had a bloodline name, he'd be back in the New City, living it up.

"Out...side..." Shiholin echoed, hesitantly. "What's out there? What kind of place is outside...?"

"This is all just what I've heard, but..." Gobuto stamped the ground for effect. "The land goes on forever and ever."

"Fukyoh..." Yumelin clasped her cheeks. "Forever 'n' ever...?"

"That's right. It continues on even beyond Nananka and Ishmal. As for what's out there, I don't know, either. But precisely because I don't know, I want to find out."

I brought a hand to my chest. What was this? In my chest there was a pounding, rushing sensation. It was a weird feeling, one I'd never felt before.

"Besides," Gobuto went on, "we goblins haven't been in Damuro forever. We apparently came from the north of Ishmal and Nananka, or from the west. But this No-Life King guy, he made an Alliance of Kings, and that gave birth to a goblin king. We goblins hadn't had a king before then. That's why the orcs mocked and tyrannized us. Though, even after we joined the Alliance of Kings, we were still in a lowly position. Goblins were treated as foot soldiers, and many, many of our people died on the front lines. Still, out of a desire for recognition from the other races, we goblins never complained, and we fought on bravely. That was why Damuro was given to us as our kingdom's domain. This is the land our ancestors won, and that's why it's our holy land. That's why we goblins cling to Damuro, no matter what happens. The New City in particular, which still looks like it did when humans lived there, is a point of pride, paid for in goblin blood. We can never abandon it. No matter what, it must be defended..."

"H-Hey, Gobuto." Gobuto was blinking. "This story is getting complicated, and I don't really get it. You were talking about that No-Time Kong guy, and his Alliance of Rings, but... I dunno, but if you have something you're trying to say, could you make it shorter? Get to the point. No, let me clarify here! It's not like

I can't understand, okay?! I'm fine, but these other morons, you're gonna have to break it down a bit more for them..."

"Sorry, sorry." Gobuto scratched his head. "Um, basically, the world's a big place. We goblins are building beneath the New City and expanding into it. But we don't try to go outside. The truth is, there are rumors that we have a secret pact with the humans... No, that doesn't matter. Anyway, I think it's weird. If the world goes on forever, what's the need for us to stay put here? We have legs on which to walk. If we walk, we move forward. Can't we go where we want?"

"Nghboaghghhhhh...!" Hobuzo suddenly leapt to his feet. "I'm going! Let's go! Food, food, food! Let's go get food! Fooood! Food to eeeeeaaat!"

"Ugahhh!" Yumelin threw her arms up. "Fooooooooooood...!"

Shiholin looked at Gobuto like he was blindingly bright.

"N-No, but still!" Was Gobuta still going to be stubborn? "Even if we do go outside, there's no guarantee there's food, right? Man, do you think it's worth that risk?"

Before Gobuto could open his mouth, I spoke up. "You afraid?"

"Huh?! Wh-Who said anything about being afraid?! I never said a word about it!"

"Then what are you dragging your feet for?"

"I-I am not! I'm just—"

"Just what? I mean, you're saying it's risky, but staying here to look for food that may not exist, or sitting around and quietly waiting for prey that may never come, that's way more risky, isn't it?"

"Sh-Shut up, Gobupiro! I don't need to hear this from you, I'm just... taking a contrary position, or whatever, okay?! It's necessary! Someone has to do it! You're a bunch of idiots, so you don't see how important I am, you little shits!" Gobuta got up and surged forward. "Come on! Let's go, people! Follow me already! It's a crazy, wide world out there! We can go anywhere, if we just get it into our heads to do so!"

Gobuto and I exchanged glances. Even Gobuto had to smile wryly at this.

First Hobuzo followed after Gobuto, then I reluctantly followed. Gobuto grabbed Shiholin's arm and pulled her to her feet. Yumelin locked arms with Shiholin and started skipping. Shiholin looked ready to trip at any second.

That was how we left the Old City of Damuro.

With Gobuto's story acting as a catalyst, our hopes were bigger than our fears—but the further we got from the Old City, the more deflated they became.

We were, after all, on the verge of starvation.

I'd even started to have fond recollections of the time I was a forced laborer, digging holes in the Underground City.

The sole way for an orphan to come by terrible food, and never in sufficient quantities, was to dig holes.

The only tools used were old swords and such that were close to breaking. With those, orphans chipped away at the unbelievably hard bedrock, little by little. We carried the excavated stone to a designated spot. From morning to night, it went on and on, and then, finally, we were given a single meal. Two small dumplings, and one bowl of soup. It wasn't filling, obviously, but it was better than nothing.

Though, honestly, it was only barely better than nothing. If possible, I didn't want to have to dig holes. But it wasn't like cattle from the good goblin houses could conveniently escape for us to catch every day.

The place where leftover food was discarded was generally occupied by a bunch of tough orphans, so we could only get at the scraps once in a rare while. When the king occasionally distributed aid, clashes over it broke out instantly.

Hole digging was our lifeline. If not for the hole digging work, it was likely none of the orphans would survive.

Those dumplings that tasted like they were packed with mud. The piss-like soup that had almost nothing solid in it tasted bad, even on an empty stomach. The food was disgusting. That was true, but for us now, I had to think that even those dumplings and that soup might have tasted delicious.

When we'd decided to leave the New City, we'd been in a celebratory mood, thinking we'd never have to eat mud dumplings and piss soup again. But what happened? Not only were mud dumplings and piss soup better than nothing, but without them, we were in trouble. We wanted them back. Now that I'd realized that, I thought of nothing but mud dumplings and piss soup.

If I looked down at the ground it felt like I might have collapsed, so I kept my head up as I walked.

The sun was shining, and at this rate, I felt like I was going to dry up.

Thud! There was a loud sound.

Looking over, Gobuta had faceplanted into the ground, his butt thrust up into the air.

"Y-You okay, Gobuta?" I asked.

"Nngh..." There was a weird sound. No, wait, that was Gobuta.

"Man... are you... eating something?" I asked.

"Washagushagushagoshawashagoshagushagusho."

"Ahhh!" Yumelin rushed over, pointed at Gobuta. "Gobutaaa! He's eatin' grass!"

"Grass..." Gobuto dropped to his knees as if collapsing. "Grass, huh? That was an option."

"Huh? Whoa... Gobuto? I mean, grass is just grass, you know...?"

"Thaaaaaaaanks!" Hobuzo got down in a kowtow-like position, and started violently stuffing grass into his mouth. "Uoghuohguohguogoh! Hobuhobuhobuboh!"

"No?! Hobuzo?!" My vision blurred with tears. "It's grass, okay?! Grass! You can't eat grass, right?! I mean, it's grass! No, but that piss soup we used to drink had something that looked like grass in it... It was super bitter and tasted awful, though..."

"Gubwahhhhh?!" Gobuta puked up a massive amount of grass. "It's bittttttttttttttttttttter?!"

“Uohhhaegh?!” Hobuzo covered his mouth with both hands, wincing at the bitterness.

“Yuuuck?!”

This was what would later come to be known as the Grass Incident.

While watching Gobuta writhe in agony, I rubbed Hobuzo’s back. “I knew it... Grass is just grass...”

“Y-Yeah... I-I know, but... I-I... couldn’t hold back... I was hungry, so hungry... I lost control...”

“D-Don’t cry, Moguzo. No, I mean Hobuzo. Huh...?”

Had I just referred to Hobuzo as Moguzo? Was I imagining that? I had to be. Hobuzo was Hobuzo.

Shiholin gulped.

“What’s wrong?” Gobuto asked. He sounded like he was about to die, which wasn’t like Gobuto at all.

“Th-This...” Shiholin pulled something from out of the grass.

“Nyoh?” Yumelin took it from Shiholin, lifting it up as she cocked her head at it.

My eyes went wide. “Th-That’s...”

“Whoa.” Gobuta pointed at me, his face still covered in grass. “Gobuhiro, man, you’ve always got those sleepy eyes, so when you open them wide like that, it’s creepy. Like, seriously creepy. Too creepy.”

“Gobuta, man, you seriously need to shut up,” I said. “The more important thing is—”

“Mushrooms, huh...” Gobuto gulped... swallowing his spit.

Yes.

What Shiholin had found in the grass, and what Yumelin was now holding aloft, was yellowish and slimy, with a cap and a stem.

It was a mushroom.

No matter where or how I looked at it, it was nothing if not a mushroom, but oh, it was a glorious example of mushroomness.

M-U-S-H-R-O-O-M. It was a mushroom.

That's moorhsum backwards, by the way.

"W-W-W-W-W-W-W-W-Wait!" I spread my arms wide, stopping everyone. "It's a mushroom, sure, but they're dangerous! I hear they're dangerous, okay? You know that, right?! Even if it looks tasty, they can be pretty poisonous! This is common sense, yeah?! I've heard of people in the New City who died from eating mushrooms, okay?!"

"You're right," Gobuta nodded. "I've heard that. But I've only heard it..."

"Yumelin." Gobuto? Why... did he have such a nice smile now?

No, he'd always had a nice smile, but still, that had to be his best smile ever, didn't it?

"Give me the mushroom."

"D-Don't be hasty, Gobuto!" I violently shook my head. "You can't! If anything were to happen to you, then what?! If someone has to test for poison, can't we make Gobuta do it?! Yeah! That would be—"

"Hey, Parupiro! No, Gobupiro! What do you mean, I should test for poison?! Are you saying if I eat poison and die, you're fine with that?! Man, is that how you've felt about me?! I'm gonna cry here, dammit!"

"A little poison isn't going to kill you, is it?!" I shot back. "I mean, they say the more hatable you are, the further you'll go in life, right?!"

"Oh?! So, you admit I'm going places, huh?! The fact is, I'm really gonna be going places! The world's my oyster, dammit!"

"Ha ha." Gobuto sounded bizarrely refreshing, even by his standards. "It's okay, Gobuhiro. I'm confident about this. There's nothing wrong with that mushroom. For some reason, I can tell. I can see it."

"Gobuto-kun..." Shiholin crossed her arms, staring piercingly at Gobuto. "You can see it? What exactly can you see?"

“Anyway, I just can! I see it! I can see things! I say I see it, so I see it! I see so much, it’s scary! Scary! So scary! What should I do?! I can see it!”

“Gobuto!” I hurriedly grabbed Gobuto’s shoulders and shook him. “Hey, Gobuto, you’re acting strange! Get it together, Gobuto! If you go crazy on us, too, what am I going to do?!”

“Okay, Yumelin!” Gobuta shouted.

“Onyoh?!”

"That mushroom, give it here! I'll eat the whole thing! I'll polish it right off!"

“No, Yumelin! Me! Give me the mushroom! I’ll eat it! I have to eat it! This is fate!” Gobuto cried.

"No, Gobuto, I told you, you can't!" I pleaded. "Please, Gobuto...!"

“...Me.” For a moment, I didn’t know whose voice it was.

To think he could speak in such a terrifying voice, forcing every one of us to shudder in fear.

"I'll eat it! Give me the mushroom! I'll eat it all! Me, me, me, me, me, me, me,
me, me, me, meeeeeeeeeeeeee...!"

“Nyueek?!”

Hobuzo snatched the mushroom from a totally intimidated Yumelin.

Gobuto, Gobuta, Shiholin and I, we all looked on in four different states of shock.

Hobuzo took the mushroom—

—and he ate it.

He didn't even chew.

He swallowed it whole.

“...Chew, at least,” Gobuta said.

“Mushrooms!” Hobuzo bellowed. “Go down smooth! They’re a drink!”

No.

That's not how it works... right?

I couldn't say it. I didn't have the guts to make a witty comeback.

"Not enooooooooooooooooooooooooooooogh!"

Hobuzo got down on all fours, searching for mushrooms. If we looked, maybe there were a lot? The moment Hobuzo found them, he stuffed them into his mouth.

"Mushroom! Mushroom! Mushroom?! Mushroom! Mushroom! Mushroom, mushroom, mushroooooom! Shroom, shroomy, shrooms! Room-mush, room-mush, roooooom?!"

"I-Is he okay?!" Gobuta burst out laughing. "The mushroom! He ate it! Hobuzo's eating the mushrooms! They're fine! Hobuzo's not dead! That means we can eat them, right?! They're edible mushrooms! Me, too! I'm gonna eat!"

"See!" Gobuto had the perfect smile. "I told you! It's fine! I knew it! I could see it! The mushrooms! The mushrooms are our savior! Now, everyone, let's eat mushrooms!"

"Y-Yumelin, too! Yumelin, too! Yumelin can't restrain herself no more!"

"M-Me, too!" Shiholin cried. "If Gobuto-kun is eating them, I will, too! No matter what happens as a result... I don't care! I'll have no regrets!"

"M-Manato... Yume... Even Shihoru... Huh?"

For an instant, I grew calm.

Had I said something strange? Just now? Was I imagining it? I was, right?

"I mean, does it even matter...?" I murmured.

Yeah. It didn't matter. Before that, this came first.

I walked around on unsteady legs.

Looking down.

In between the blades of grass, there were mushrooms. Mushrooms. Mushrooms.

I crouched down. I reached for a mushroom. It was slimy to the touch. This

was a mushroom. Oh, it was so... so lovely. It felt a shame to tear it from the earth, but I would. I was going to yank it out, and eat it.

“Ohh... Mushroom!” I cried.

Did it taste good? Or bad? I couldn’t tell. Whatever, it was a mushroom. I could only say it tasted mushroom-y. This, this was a mushroom. The ultimate mushroom experience. It was a mushroom. In my next life, let me be a mushroom.

Was that how it was? To be reincarnated as a mushroom, did I have to eat mushrooms? Like, more and more mushrooms? Like, eat so many mushrooms, I myself become a mushroom? Hold on, after I popped one, then two, I started thinking, *Hey, these are pretty good. Mushrooms are the best, aren’t they?* The mushrooms filled my mouth, no, my whole body. They were mellow and mild, not cloying, and mushrooms began dancing in my head.

Mushrooms, mushrooms, mushrooms, mushrooms.
Shroomsshroomsshroomsshroomsshroomsshroomsshroomsshroomsshroomssh

It was kinda, whoa, there were sparks in my eyes?

There was a stinging in my stomach?

My throat was burning hot, too?

What was all this?

Wasn’t I oozing with greasy sweat?

“Ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow! Ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ouch?!”

I rolled around.

It was my stomach. I was probably having stomach pains, but that wasn’t all; I hurt all over. It hurt too much.

While being tormented by a pain like none I’d ever experienced, I looked and saw I wasn’t the only one suffering. It was everyone. Every one of us was in a similar state.

“A-Are we gonna die?” I wailed. “Uaghaghghh, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow, ow,

ow!”

The sky was still blue.

This was what would later come to be known as the Mushroom Incident.

2. Red Berries

“Well, sure. You can say that or this about what happened, but... Yumelin and everyone have good luck, that’s what Yumelin thinks...”

Was... that right?

Honestly, I didn’t really know.

But, well, maybe it wasn’t impossible to claim that...?

We were, after all, still alive. Even after all the writhing and agony, no one had died.

When Hobuzo had taken off running, probably crazed by the pain, we’d all crawled after him to an area full of trees. It was the first time I’d seen so many trees in my life.

While we were all resting against the trees, we gradually settled down. Those mushrooms were poisonous, but maybe not toxic enough to be life-threatening.

Whatever the case, we’d survived.

“Anyway, it’s not that or this, it’s this or that, okay?” I said.

“Mew...? Yumelin’s always thought it was that or this. Was she wrong? Huh...”

“Well, it’s fine, really,” I said. “This and that, or that and this. Not much difference.”

“It’s a huge difference, moron!” Gobuta said, practically spitting out the words. He was clinging to a tree for some reason. “They’re way too different. Anything and everything, and everything and anything, are completely different!”

“That’s not what she said, though.”

“Shut up. Stupid Gobuhiro. You don’t know how I feel...”

“This conversation was never about how you feel.”

“Gwehhhh,” Gobuta moaned. “Soooo hungryyyy...”

“Man, are you even listening to what I say?”

“I’m too hungry for that...”

“Is this a forest?” Shiholin seemed to snap to her senses and looked around at the trees. “I’ve heard stories of a place with lots of trees called a forest.”

“Oh, yeah?” Gobuto stood up on shaky legs, placing a hand on a tree for support as he looked up above the trees. “The forest. I’ve heard of it, too. There are all sorts of creatures in the forest. We should have an easier time coming by food, at least compared to the fields or the Old City.”

“Are...” Hobuzo looked at the tree with empty eyes. “Are we going to eat these...?”

“No...” Gobuto shook his head. “That’s not how it works...”

Hobuzo, it was quite plain to see, was reaching his limits. No, he was already past them. It might only have been because he was a hobgoblin, bigger and tougher than us goblins, that he was still holding on.

I looked to Hobuzo, Gobuto, Yumelin, Shiholin, and lastly Gobuta, in turn. I didn’t care about Gobuta, but everyone else, I considered them friends. There was a sense of common purpose there, too. Or maybe they were like brothers and sisters to me.

“I’ll go look,” I said. “For food. I can probably move around, if it’s not for too long.”

“I’ll go, too.” Even at a time like this, Gobuto smiled.

“What should Yumelin do? She wants to go, but she might end up collapsin’...”

“You shouldn’t... push yourself...” Shiholin used something like a staff for support, straining herself to stand up. “...I’ll go. You stay here...”

“I’m not going.” Gobuta was still clinging to the tree. “You people go. Go, and bring back food for me. Hurry it up. If you don’t, I’ll die.”

“Then just die...” I muttered.

“How can you say that, Gobupirolin?! I’ll kill you, you dolt!”

“You’ve still got the energy, huh?”

“I do not! I’m barely breathing here! Now go! Quick! Hurry it up! Go on! Go, go, go! Get on with it! Hurry back, and keep me alive!”

I didn’t want to waste my strength arguing with this piece of trash. Gobuto, Shiholin, and I headed into the forest.

Not long after that, Shiholin stumbled, Gobuto caught her without missing a beat, and he told her to hold on to his arm. Shiholin seemed really hesitant to accept at first, but once she’d grabbed on, there was no sign of her letting go.

For my part, I felt safest with her doing that. Shiholin had the least stamina out of all of us. Honestly, it was a mystery to me. Why had she come? Wouldn’t it have been better for her to rest with Yumelin?

“Gobuhiro,” Gobuto began.

“Hm...? What, Gobuto?”

“...It’s nothing.”

“Hey, listen,” I said.

“Huh?”

“I have no regrets, okay? The one who suggested leaving Damuro... Well, sure, that may have been you. But I agreed with it when we left. I mean, I don’t really know, but... I don’t think it was a mistake, or anything like that...”

“Yeah.”

“This isn’t anyone’s fault... or anything, you know? It’s especially not your fault, Gobuto. You’re always... leading us, I guess you could say. If you weren’t around, we’d... never have changed.”

“I can’t say I agree with that.”

“No, it’s true. It is. We’d be the same as ever. Orphans with nothing, and unable to do anything... That’s how things would have ended for us. Don’t you agree, Shiholin?”

“I do. Honestly... Gobuhiro-kun is right. I...”

That surprised me.

Shiholin started to cry.

“...I’m grateful. So grateful... I wanted to tell you that someday, Gobuto-kun. I just couldn’t...”

“No, I should be thanking you,” Gobuto said softly.

As I’d thought, Gobuto was really amazing. If it were me, and she started crying like that, I’d probably panic, with no idea how to respond. Gobuto was different. He gently patted Shiholin on the back, smiling at her.

“I’m grateful to all of you, letting a guy like me be one of you.”

In a way, that surprised me more than Shiholin’s tears.

A guy like me?

If we were talking about Gobuta, I could understand him referring to himself like that. Though, come hell or high water, Gobuta would never say it.

But with Gobuto, there was nothing that should have made him so down on himself. Was it humility? If it was, it didn’t suit him.

In fact, I wanted to thank *him* for letting people like us be his comrades. That was how I really felt. Though, like Shiholin, I couldn’t say that, even if I wanted to. It was embarrassing, and felt too impersonal. But...

Was something up?

I thought so.

Gobuto was knowledgeable. He knew all sorts of things orphans like us shouldn’t. Naturally, that didn’t matter, and Gobuto was one of us, but he was different. I sensed that occasionally—no, fairly often. Gobuto wasn’t like us. He was too different from us orphans without bloodline names.

Gobuto might not be an orphan.

That thought passed through my head again. It really was impossible, though. If he weren't an orphan, he'd be living well, in a proper house and everything.

Well, what's it matter? I thought.

Gobuto was one of us. We all saw Gobuto as a comrade. So, no matter who Gobuto was, that was fine. If he had a secret, or a situation that was hard to talk about, or anything else, Gobuto would tell us if he wanted to talk about it.

That he wasn't talking meant either that there was nothing, or that he didn't want to. If he didn't want to talk now, he might someday. I'd, of course, be happy to listen.

There was no need to rush things.

Gobuto wasn't going anywhere.

He was our comrade.

We'd always be together.

Well, that was assuming we didn't starve to death.

Feeling a sudden bout of dizziness, I collapsed into the undergrowth.

"Gobuhiro...?!"

"Gobuhiro-kun!"

Gobuto and Shiholin rushed over immediately and tried to extract me from the bushes. I rejected the help, though.

"...Hold on. This is—"

In the low branches of the underbrush I had fallen into, there were what looked like red berries.

No, they didn't just look like berries—they *were* berries.

I picked them. We'd just been through the Mushroom Incident, so maybe I should have been more cautious, but I stuck it in my mouth without hesitation.

"It's sour... but sweet...?"

"Huh? Gobuhiro? What are you eating?" Gobuto asked.

"What's... sweet...?" ventured Shiholin.

“Berries! These round, red berries! They’re delicious! I think?! I’ve never eaten anything like them, so they feel weird in my mouth, but—So good! Yeah! They’re delicious!”

When they saw me stuffing my mouth with berries, Gobuto and Shiholin reached out, too. I hurriedly stopped them.

“Whoa, whoa! They could be poison! I already ate them, so I’m the poison tester! If time goes by and I’m still all right, then...”

“O-Oh, right.” Gobuto wiped his mouth. “Uh oh. The moment I thought we could eat them, they started looking tastier...”

Shiholin slumped down, a pathetic look on her face. “You’re killing me...”

I could understand the feeling, but we had to keep sacrifices to a minimum.

We waited like that.

For quite a long time, I felt.

“It’s safe...” Gobuto swallowed his spit in anticipation. “Wouldn’t... you say?”

Shiholin nodded eagerly. “It’s fine. Definitely.”

“Well...” I rubbed my throat and stomach. Nothing felt off. So far as I could tell. “I guess?”

“Well, then...” Gobuto plucked a red berry from a branch. “Down the hatch.”

Not wanting to be outdone by Gobuto, I ate, too.

So did Shiholin.

One after another.

We ate more and more.

I couldn’t stop—

Wait, is there a need to stop? No, right? Then it’s eating time. I’m gonna eat. I have to eat, right? I ought to eat. I’ve gotta eat, right? I’m gonna eat like crazy. Of course I’ll eat. What’s wrong with eating?! Nothing. Absolutely nothing. Eating is righteous. We must eat. Eat, eat, eeeeat!

“...Ah!”

When I came to my senses, my face was a mess of red berry juice... no, my whole body had gone bright red.

Not just me. Shiholin, too. And Gobuto.

“Ha!” Unable to help myself, I laughed. “Wahaha! Waha! Gobuto, Shiholin! You’re red! Too red! Aha! Hahaha!”

“Bwah ha!” Gobuto laughed. “You, too, Gobuhiro! Red! Red everywhere! Shiholin, too!”

“Hee hee. Hee. D-Don’t look... Hee hee. Gobuto-kun, Gobuhiro-kun, you’re both red... Pfft...! Mweeheeheehee...”

We all clutched our guts and laughed out loud. The impulse to laugh wasn’t dying down. But I wasn’t so sure what was supposed to be funny anymore, and it was no time to be laughing.

“L-Let’s go, heheheheh... We have to let Hobuzo and Yumelin... and I guess Gobuta, too, know... Heheheheh... We need to let them eat, too!”

“Y-You’re right, Heheheh... It hurts... Heheheh... We need to hurry, and let them eat... Hahahaha...”

“I can’t take anymore... M-My stomach, it hurts... I’m laughing too hard... Heh, heh, heh...”

We somehow managed to suppress our laughter on the way back, but when the others saw us, Hobuzo, Yumelin, and Gobuta jumped up into the air.

“Uwahhhh?!”

“Eeeeeeeeeek?!”

“Gwahhhh, man, you’re all covered in blood?! D-Don’t tell me you’ve died, and you’re back as ghosts?!”

We’d all forgotten we were bright red with berry juice.

This would later come to be known as the Red Berry Incident.

That aside, we had now managed to come by food. The berries weren’t filling, but they were plentiful, and as we stuffed ourselves, the feeling of hunger faded. No one got an upset stomach, and turning red with berry juice was

tolerable.

We might not have been full, but we had a lot in our bellies.

We all lay down on the ground.

"I'm glad," I managed at last. "I don't know how to say it, but..." I was trying to say something, but I couldn't find the words. "It was good. Being able to find something to eat."

"Well, yeah," Yumelin giggled. "It was, but it sure was a surprise when Gobukun, and Gobuto, and Shiholin came. Nyuhuhuhuh..."

"We didn't look that different from how you do now, you know?" Shiholin said, in a teasing tone that was rare from her.

"Oh, yeah? Wahh! You're right. Eeheehee. Guess we'll need some bathin'."

"Bathing, huh..." Gobuta let out a perverse laugh. "Sounds good to me. Bathing. If we look, there's gotta be something. A pool of water, somewhere. Let's all bathe together, and get refreshed. Uweheheh..."

"Just gonna say this now, Yumelin's not gettin' in with you, Gobuta."

"Why not?! You were the one who said you wanted to bathe!"

"Because, Gobuta, you seem like you'd keep starin'. Like, at weird places. You absolutely would."

"Keh," Gobuta muttered. "What've you got to lose by being seen? I mean, your bare flesh? It's not even worth looking at. Now, Shiholin on the other hand..."

"I refuse, too. That goes without saying, though."

"Don't be so stingy!" Gobuta hollered. "You don't lose anything by being seen! Think of it as a service to the rest of us! A service!"

"Why should I offer any kind of service to you? I'd sooner die."

"Yumelin, too! Not in this life, or the next!"

"Water..." Gobuto sat up, scratching his chin. "That's right. We'll want to secure a watering hole. The red berries will last us a few days, so in that time, we need to secure a watering hole and a new source of food."

That was Gobuto for you. Already thinking about the next step. Me, though? I didn't want to do, or think about, anything for a while. It didn't feel like I could think of anything.

"We're alive, huh," Hobuzo said, his voice quivering just a little. "Being alive, it's incredible. All of us are alive. I'm just so... happy."

Shiholin sniffled. She seemed to be crying.

"Yeah. That's right." Yumelin patted Shiholin on the head. "Yumelin's real glad, too. Who knew just livin' was somethin' to be so happy about?"

"Yeah..." Gobuto lay down. "You're right. I mean it. It's nice to be alive. We're all right, and maybe it's enough just for us all to be alive like this. Wasn't that what you were trying to tell us earlier, Gobuhiro?"

"Well..." I started to feel like it was. I mean, that was probably it, so I was a bit embarrassed. "...Maybe? I wonder. Yeah. Could be...?"

"Ha!" Gobuta scoffed. "Who's happy just to be alive? You moron. Just living's enough? Could your aspirations possibly be any lower? Can't you do better? Have some drive, some ambition..."

"What, do you have something like that then, Gobuta?" I asked.

"Damn straight I do. Listen and be amazed, Gobupirosuke. Get this, I..."

"Shh!" Gobuto raised a finger to his lips.

We fell silent. Gobuto's demeanor was filled with an intensity that made us.

Gobuto quickly stood. We all rose, too, doing our best to make no noise. We walked silently through the woods with Gobuto leading the way. It wasn't long before we heard voices. We each pressed our backs to a tree, lowering our postures.

I whispered to Gobuto, who was beside me, "What are those voices?"

"Not goblins. We can be sure of that, I think."

"Then..."

I was frightened. Not just inside. I was so scared I couldn't keep it hidden.

Aren't you being too much of a scaredy cat? I thought. But I had a reason to

be so shook up.

“...Humans, huh?” I whispered.

“Most likely,” Gobuto replied, using hand signs to signal to us. The sign meant stay here, I got that much, but what was Gobuto planning to do?

...Go in alone, apparently.

Before hesitation could kick in, my body moved on its own.

I chased after Gobuto. He noticed me and shook his head. I shook my head right back at him.

I'm scared as all hell, but do you think I'm going to let you go in alone?

Gobuto shrugged as if to say, *I guess I'll have to live with this.*

It may have been my imagination, but, at that moment, Gobuto looked a little relieved.

Also, and this was a first, he seemed vulnerable somehow. If someone didn't stay by his side, it'd be bad. I may have sensed that and chased after him in response. Even though I was pretty sure me being with him wasn't going to make a whole lot of difference.

Still, if it came down to it, I might be able to at least die in his place. Without Gobuto, everyone would be in trouble. When I thought about it that way, that encouraged me a little.

Eventually, the human voices got really close. I still couldn't see them, but it felt pretty dangerous. Gobuto and I stuck close to one another, hiding in the bushes.

I was quivering, of course, but so was Gobuto.

Gobuto was scared, too?

At some point, it had started to get dark out.

The humans were talking about something.

“...What now?”

“There's not much we can do... We've got to head back. To Alterna.”

“Boys in pain, all in vain, huh...”

“Who’re the boys in pain?”

“S-Still! ...A-Actually, it’s nothing.”

“...I’m hungry.”

“Once we get back, let’s hit the market and get dinner somewhere first. I know a cheap place where we can stay the night. It’s a lodging house for volunteer soldiers in the west of town—”

“Tch. Maybe we oughta camp out. Since we didn’t bring in a single copper coin.”

“No, we should save that as a last resort. They may be shared, but the lodging house has—”

The fear was mounting, and I felt like I might die at any second, but I noticed something strange.

Why did I understand what the humans were saying?

That wasn’t normal... right? I mean, I was a goblin. The humans clearly spoke a different language from us goblins. Despite that, I could understand. This was clearly weird.

Eventually, the humans moved away. Gobuto and I poked our heads out of the brush, watching them go.

One... Two... Three... Four... Five... Six... Six of them.

It had to be a coincidence, but there were six humans, just like there were six of us.

The humans were soon out of sight, and I could no longer hear their voices and footsteps.

“Those are humans,” Gobuto said with a tortured expression, still staring off into the direction the humans had gone.

“Gobuto...?”

“Huh? What?”

“Nah, I don’t know what I wanted to say...”

For some reason, I couldn’t say it. That I’d understood the human’s language.

Also, I couldn’t help but feel Gobuto held some special feelings towards the humans, but I couldn’t confront him about that, either.

“Should we head back?” I asked. “To everyone else. They must be worried.”

“Oh...” Gobuto smiled.

It didn’t just seem forced. It felt manufactured, or to be more harsh, like a suspicious lie of a smile. It didn’t suit Gobuto.

“That makes sense. Let’s head back. To our comrades.”

3. The Illusion In Which I Exist

Day after day, we walked around the forest.

The red berries grew here and there, so it didn’t look like we’d be starving for a while.

We found a watering hole that wasn’t too murky. It was too small to bathe in, but we could drink from it. It tasted a little muddy, but we’d been fine drinking even more filthy water in the New City, so this was actually an improvement.

One day, we found the remains of a beast. It was still freshly dead, and hardly rotted at all, so we ate it together.

Gobuta found the remains of a human. It had been some time for this one, and there were signs that the remains had been torn apart by beasts. Gobuta took the corpse’s clothing, as well as a knife, for himself.

I found the dead human’s things creepy and unsettling, but the more blades we had, the better. The bow that Yumelin had picked up somewhere didn’t shoot straight, and it wasn’t going to be much help.

We’d only had broken swords, stone axes, and wooden sticks to start with. The way things were, if it came to a fight, we were in trouble.

“Gobuhiro! They’re heading your way, too!” Gobuto called out.

I hurriedly adjusted the grip on my broken sword.

There were these large rat-like creatures running around between the six of us. Not just one. Several of them.

One of them was charging straight towards me.

“Gwah...!” I swung my broken sword.

That didn’t connect.

I missed.

By the time I’d thought that, there was an intense pain in my shin.

“Arrrgh!!”

It bit me?!

No, wait, it’s biting me!

With a violent shake of my leg, I tried to dislodge it, but another of the big rats jumped on me, and sank its teeth into my left arm.

“Ow...!”

“Gobu-kun!” Yumelin nocked an arrow. She was aiming my way.

—*Huh? At me?*

“D-D-Don’t do it, Yumelin!” I screamed.

You may be trying to take down the rats biting me, but there’s no way you’ll hit them. You can’t do it. I mean, you’ll hit me in—

“Mrrowr!” Yumelin loosed her arrow.

Ultimately, my fears were all in vain.

Her arrow sailed off in a completely different direction.

Basically, the situation hadn’t changed. I was still being eaten alive by two rats.

“Fwaghh! Waghh!” I couldn’t tell if Hobuzo was swinging that big log around, or if it was swinging him around.

“Nooooooooo!” Shiholin was running around.

“Damn...” As for Gobuta—he had climbed a tree on his own, and was looking down at the rest of us. “This is a hopeless mess...”

“There!” It was Gobuto. Gobuto was the only one narrowly managing to beat off the big rats that came at him using a wooden stick. “Hah! Grah! Gobuhiro! Are you okay?!”

Gobuto didn’t seem to be having an easy time, either, so I just answered that I was fine, but my right shin and left arm hurt, and I wasn’t fine at all. It was all I could do to keep from crying and wailing.

“Uwagh...!”

In the end, I tripped on something and fell over.

The big rats that had sunk their fangs into me showed no sign of letting go.

I couldn’t even get up.

“Urgggggghh!” I wailed.

Am I going to die...?

I’m going to get killed by rats...?

“Gobuhiro!”

The rats let go of my left arm first, then my right shin. Gobuto had run in, chasing the big rats off with his stick.

“Can you stand?!” he cried.

“Y-Yeah!”

“Stand back to back with me! Yumelin and Shiholin, get behind Hobuzo!”

“Meow!”

“R-Right!”

“Gobuta, get down here! We can’t do this without you, man!”

“W-Well, I guess I’ll have to, then! If you insist, I’ll save you!”

“Everyone, let’s keep calm! The fur on these things is awfully hard, so blades probably won’t go through! Don’t slash or stab; crush them with everything you’ve got! Hobuzo, you don’t need that log! Your body itself is a weapon!”

“Ngh! Ngh! Nghhhhhhh!”

The tables turned in an instant—Yeah, no.

I, for one, was at my limit just standing back to back with Gobuto as requested, and all I could do was pray, *No rats come my way, don't come, please, don't come!*

But as we kept at it, the rats all took off somewhere.

We sat down.

“Rats are scary...” Gobuta moaned, then shook his head. “No! I wasn't scared, though, okay?! I-I'm just saying they're a threat to you weaklings.”

“I-I was scared...” Hobuzo had broken into a cold sweat. “I still am...”

“That was exhaustin'...” Yumelin lay down. “The rats were awful big. They looked so cute, too...”

“C-Cute...?” Shiholin seemed a little grossed out. “You... really think so?”

“Gobuhiro.” Gobuto took my left arm and looked at the wound. “The wound's not deep, but it could get worse if we don't treat it. The one on your leg, too.”

“With a little spit, it'll get better.” I looked down at the ground. “...Probably.”

That was all I could say. There was nothing else to be done. For treatment, about all we could really do was wash it out with muddy water.

Even so, Gobuto and my comrades tore strips off their clothes and pressed the cleaned strips of cloth to the opening of the wound. They had me drink some sort of medicine-like stuff made from ground grass. They tidied up a sleeping spot for me and let me rest. They did all sorts of things.

But I got a fever.

An incredible fever, like my whole body was on fire.

I was sure some bad air or something had gotten in through the wound. I'd been scared since the big rats attacked me, but I was strangely calm somehow, and I thought about how, if I lost to this bad air, I'd be dead. I felt bad for my comrades, and I apologized.

I couldn't move. One of my comrades stayed at my side, tending to me, while

the rest went off to search for food or do other things.

When Yumelin was attending to me, she lay down next to me, hugging me.
“Listen, Gobu-kun, if you don’t like this, just say so.”

“No... It’s fine. Totally fine, but... why?”

“Hmm, well, Yumelin was thinkin’, if she were havin’ a hard time, she’d want someone to do this for her.”

“I see... That makes sense... It’s kinda... reassuring...”

“It’s okay for you to relax waaaaay more. Then, if you feel like you’re gettin’ sleepy, sleep. If you sleep a whoooooole lot, you’re sure to get better.”

It seemed that, while Yumelin was hugging me and patting my head, I fell asleep.

I slept, and woke, and slept, and woke—repeatedly, until I didn’t know what was up anymore. Was I sleeping? Or was I awake?

Shiholin talked with me. “I think your complexion’s looking a little better, maybe?”

“Oh... Seriously? If it is... I’m glad.”

“I think you’re getting better, little by little,” she said. “Everyone’s doing their best... and I know you’re fighting hard, too, Gobuhiro-kun.”

“All I’m doing is sleeping, though...”

“Gobuhiro-kun.”

“...Yeah? What?”

“You can’t die. Please, just... don’t die on us.”

“You’re blowing things out of proportion... This is nothing...”

I laughed. But, man, was I really still alive? Was I sure I wasn’t actually dead?

“Hey! Get up, Gobuhiro!” Gobuta yelled.

There was a pain in my side.

“Ow! ...Don’t kick me, Gobuta. Man, I’m injured here...”

“Like I care, you moron! Get better, and get up already! When you’re lying there like that, it’s too depressing! Recover at top speed, for my sake! That’s an order!”

“Don’t be unreasonable... I’m feeling sluggish...”

I felt sluggish, or—

Yeah. It’s more like I can’t tell if my body’s heavy or light. Everything feels far away. Like I’m in another place, far away from where I am. It feels weird. What is this?

“Haruhiro-kun... Haruhiro-kun? Haruhiro-kun...”

“Ah... Moguzo?”

“Were you sleeping? Your eyes were open, so I thought you were awake...”

“I... dunno... Uh... I was awake... I think?”

“I made soup. I got the fire started. Can you eat? You should eat something, even if you have to force yourself...”

“Yeah... I should... I’ll eat... You went out of... your way to... make it for me...”

“Come on, I’ll sit you up? Okay?”

“Ngh... I’m fine...”

“Come on, eat. It’s cooled down a bit, so it shouldn’t be hot.”

“Ngh... Haww... Ngh... It’s good, Moguzo... You’re a good cook...”

“No, I’m not. I just like eating, so I—”

But what did it taste like?

Hold on, what was I being fed again?

I didn’t know.

“Hey, Manato.”

“Huh?” Manato turned towards me.

No. Not Manato.

“Gobuhiro,” Gobuto said. “What did you just call me?”

“I called you... something...” I blinked. “What was it... again? No, but you’re Gobuto. Huh...? But, somehow, I...”

“Didn’t you call me *Manato*?”

“Manato—” I wiped the corner of my mouth. “That’s right. I called you Manato. Yeah. That, and I think... Was I dreaming? I was referring to Hobuzo as Moguzo. And Hobuzo called me... Haruhiro.”

“It’s the same.”

“Huh? What do you mean, the same?”

“For me, too, Haruhiro. —No, sorry. Gobuhiro. I see dreams sometimes. In those dreams, we’re not goblins... we’re all human. You’re Haruhiro. Gobuta is Ranta. Hobuzo is Moguzo. Yumelin is Yume, and Shiholin is Shihoru. As for me... everyone calls me Manato.”

As I got up, I tried to find the words. But none came to me. What exactly did all this mean? Manato and I—no, Gobuto and I—were seeing the same dream, and in it, we weren’t goblins, we were human, and— Wait, was I... up?

“Ah! I got... better?” I exclaimed.

“Ah!” Gobuto’s eyes were wide. “Y-You’re... okay, right? I mean, you got yourself up...”

“Y-Yeah. Well... I’m still a bit unsteady, but I feel a lot better. I guess?”

“Thank goodness.” When Gobuto covered his face with both hands, something I never would have expected happened. His whole body trembled.

Then, *Huh? Could he be?* I thought. *Is Gobuto crying?*

“Thank goodness... I mean it... I always believed you’d get better, but there was always the possibility... I didn’t want to think about it, but I always did... Anyway, I’m glad you’re all right.”

I started to reach out, then pulled my hand back and scratched my head. Until Gobuto caught his breath, moved his hands away from his face, and turned a smile my way, I wasn’t able to do anything but stand there in silence.

“I’ll go call the others,” he said. “Gobuhiro, you stay here. You’re not back in

top shape yet, I'm sure."

"Yeah. Got it. Um..." I returned the smile. I dunno, I was embarrassed, so I felt like all I could do was smile. "Thanks. For everything."

Gobuto gently clapped me on the shoulder, then went to get our comrades. Maybe I was still a bit out of it. I was feeling a bit weak, so I laid back down. But, well, I was sure I'd be fine. Like Gobuto said, and it was obvious I wasn't back to full strength yet. I was sure that was all.

It was another three days before I could move around normally again.

While I was down, my comrades found hard nuts you could eat if you peeled the shell off them, non-poisonous mushrooms, iffy-looking but not bad-tasting bugs, and clear spring water. They also headed back to the Old City, keeping an eye on how things were.

Our lives were taking a bit of a turn for the better. The big, hard-haired rats merited caution, though. When they came after us in a pack, it was best to run for it.

We occasionally spotted other beasts, too. One had these slim legs, a long neck, and big black eyes. We caught it, ate it, and it was really good.

There were sometimes tools lying around that seemed to come from humans. Even if they were broken or decomposing, we always took them.

We went to the Old City, too. When we encountered other goblins, it was awkward, and some of them tried to intimidate us, but Gobuta always lost his temper when that happened.

Whenever it seemed like a serious fight was about to break out, we'd drag Gobuta away and leave.

Many of the goblins of the Old City, but by no means all of them, were properly armed, and even had armor. There were apparently groups that consisted of not just a few, but over ten goblins, too. Those sorts were usually holding a well, and they seemed to be managing to get food from somewhere.

We considered asking to join a group. We'd have to humble ourselves pretty badly, but I wouldn't find it intolerable so long as it provided a secure life. But it

wasn't just Gobuta who objected to doing it; Gobuto did, too.

"I don't think we left the New City because we wanted to be ruled over by someone else," he said.

"You heard him, Gobupiroh," Gobuta snarled. "Don't you even get that much, man? You're a moron. You've got such shit for brains, there's no saving you. You're trash! You're crap!"

"Even if we assume for a moment that I am trash, I don't want to hear that from scum like you."

"Huh? Meeee? Whaaaat? What did you saaaay? I'm sorry I don't speak the language of crap, so I don't understaaaand."

"I hope you get reduced to dust," Shiholin murmured.

"Oh, ho. Is that a thing you say to your comrade, Shiholin? You have no class, huh? You're totally debased. Well, if you'll let me grope your boobs first, I'm happy to get turned to dust."

"My boo...?! Th-There's no way I'd let you!"

"Geez! Gobutaaa! Just how horrible are you tryin' to be?!" Yumelin yelled.

"Oooh, insult me some more! I don't care what an idiot tells me!"

"Ha ha," Hobuzo laughed. "You're... really something, Gobuta. You've got a strong heart, you could say..."

"Hobuzo! For all your size, you've got way too small a heart, man!"

Gobuta aside, if Gobuto objected, we weren't going to join a group. It wasn't like I wanted to have to kiss up to someone, anyway. I mean, if possible, I wanted to avoid it.

If we didn't have to choose that method—if we could live without doing things we didn't want to, there was no need to do them.

How could we go on like this together for as long as possible?

Gobuto would think of that stuff. I just had to follow him.

Occasionally, I found myself almost starting to think that way. Worse yet, I wouldn't even think. I'd just find myself relying on Gobuto for everything as we

lived our everyday lives.

Today, we found a lot of edible mushrooms.

Today, we killed a beast, and we ate it together. It was super delicious, and we were all full.

Today, we picked up a nice sword. It was a big one, so we had Hobuzo carry it.

Today, it rained.

Today, some goblins in the Old City picked a fight with us. It was a volatile situation.

Today, nothing particularly good or bad happened.

Today, I slept well.

Today, I had that dream. I talked about it with Gobuto.

Today, we went across the forest. It was awfully wide.

Today, we tried approaching the human city.

Today, it seemed like Gobuta must have done something bad, because Yumelin clobbered him hard.

Today, nothing went well, and it was depressing.

Today, I had a pretty good day.

Today—

Our lot in life was looking a lot better than when we'd first left the New City. It was a rare day that we didn't come by something to eat. Being well-fed and moving around a lot, we naturally built stamina. We were probably stronger now than we had been back then. We'd seen, heard, and learned so much. What was where, what to do when. We were now a little wiser.

It was like, well, we were moving forward. In a concrete way.

Weren't things fine this way?

Wasn't it fine not thinking too much, not agonizing over everything?

"I mean, not that I am," I murmured.

I was taking an afternoon nap.

As for why, it was because the rain last night had been pretty bad, making it hard to settle down and get to sleep. It let up when the sun rose, and the weather cleared, making the ground dry in no time. It was awfully warm, so we'd started talking about having a nap in the middle of the field.

I might have wondered if it was really safe, but it seemed obvious that if we chose a place with a good view, we'd quickly notice anything approaching. Gobuto had seemed a little hesitant, but he hadn't said we couldn't.

So it's fine, right?

Was everyone already asleep?

I could hear snoring. Hobuzo? Or maybe Gobuta?

"Pfft..." Shiholin suddenly broke out laughing.

Was she awake? No, that wasn't it. Looking over, her eyes were shut, and she looked to be sleeping. But she was stifling a laugh.

"Heheheh..."

She might have been having a weird dream. I could understand if it was Yumelin, but it was kind of unexpected coming from Shiholin.

Yumelin was lying face-up, her hands crossed over her belly, breathing softly.

What about Gobuto? His eyes were closed, but was he asleep, or was he awake?

I sighed.

Honestly, this was super... comfy.

Like, this state, where I was getting ridiculously sleepy, and I was about ready to pass out, but just couldn't seem to, was great.

In my muddled head, I thought about this and that.

But those thoughts melted as soon as they formed, and when something else came up, they were gone without a trace.

If I were alone, I'd never have anything like this.

I was sure. I mean, it was practically guaranteed.

If I were alone, I'd feel anxious.

It was only because others were around that I could nap like this.

Naps are awesome.

No, more like having comrades is awesome.

Living is awesome.

Awesome...

It was bright, even with my eyelids closed. The wind was soft, and the grass and dirt gentle. My comrades' presence was reassuring.

This had all come together, and I was in the middle of it. No, more than being in the middle, I was part of it...

It was like I might see another dream...

That was the feeling I got.

Manato.

Moguzo.

Ranta.

Yume.

Shihoru.

I was going to see them all again.

"Get up!"

Manato? No. It was Gobuto.

He sounded frantic. I leapt to my feet without delay.

Shiholin was already up. Gobuta and Yumelin were just sitting up, rubbing their eyes.

"Damn, we've got to run!" Gobuto was trying to pull Hobuzo to his feet. "No, we won't make it—we've got to be ready to fight!"

"Fight?!" Gobuta clutched the sword he'd acquired a little while back as he

jumped to his feet. “Wh-Wh-Wh-Who was it that said this place was safe?!”

“You were saying it, too, man!” I shot back at him before shaking my head.

My vision was shaking.

What is this? What is this? What in the world is this? I don’t get it. Whatever, they’re coming this way. It’s the humans. They’re charging in. I mean, they’re almost upon us. They’re close. Too close. We won’t make it. Yeah. Running’s out of the question. We have to do this. Do this? Do I mean fight? With those humans?

“Take this! Hatred!”

Ranta.

Ranta came flying towards me.

I dodged. I jumped to the side, desperately avoiding Ranta’s longsword.

“Whoa!” I cried.

“Tch...! I missed, huh? Well, you’re not getting away!”

“Thaaaanks...!”

Next was Moguzo. Moguzo was trying to hit Gobuto with his bastard sword.

“Ah!” Gobuto turned Moguzo’s bastard sword aside with his wooden stick.

“Marc em Parc!”

That was Shihoru. When Shihoru in her mage outfit drew elemental sigils with the tip of her staff, a fist-sized bead of light flew out—towards Shiholin.

“Augh!” The bead of light struck Shiholin in the chest, knocking her on her rump.

“Meow! Shiholin!” Yumelin tried to loose an arrow at Shihoru.

An arrow flew in.

It was Yume. Yume shot it. That arrow headed for Yumelin, and though it didn’t actually hit her, it did graze her.

Yumelin dropped her bow in surprise. “Fwah...?!”

“Hmph, that was a close one!” Yume called as she dropped her bow, drawing a machete. She charged in.

In that moment, I felt a chill, and threw myself to the ground. When I looked, there I was—the human me, Haruhiro. Haruhiro had snuck up on the goblin me, trying to sink a dagger into my back, apparently.

I’d managed to avoid eating a dagger just in the nick of time. But, seriously, what was this? What was going on? How was this happening? What in the world was happening here?

“Rahhhh!”

Haruhiro came at me. I managed to parry his dagger with my sword somehow. I blocked and I dodged, but Haruhiro kept coming.

His eyes were bloodshot. He was serious. Haruhiro meant business. He was trying to kill me.

Scary. What is this? Scary. Super scary.

I was intimidated. I tripped. Haruhiro jumped on me. He held me down.

I didn’t even have a sword anymore. I’d let go of it.

Haruhiro tried to thrust the dagger down at me. I grabbed his arms, stopping it.

“Let go! Let go! You’re pretty strong, damn it!”

Haruhiro was trying to kill me.

I screamed. “Stop! Stop it! It’s me! I’m me, okay? You’re me! I’m me! Killing me is crazy!”

But maybe Haruhiro couldn’t hear it? Because I was a goblin? But I could tell what Haruhiro was saying. I mean, he was me. I was Haruhiro. No, I was Gobuhiro, wasn’t I? Well, whatever, this was crazy. The dagger.

“Die!” he screamed. “Just die! Please, die! Give up already! Please!”

There’s no way I was going to give up. I couldn’t give up, right? But this was no good. He’d overpower me at this rate. He’d push past my resistance.

Ohh. Not good. Seriously. The dagger.

It was right in front of my eye. Not metaphorically. It was almost touching it. The tip of the dagger. If I blinked, it might touch my eyelid.

Stop. This is wrong. Help me.

Manato...!



“Hm...?” I murmured.

Manato.

It’s Manato.

“What’s wrong, Haruhiro?” Manato asked. “Huh? Were you sleeping?”

“...Huh...” I shook my head. I blinked. This should have been obvious, but there was no dagger touching my eye.

Wait. Hold on. What dagger?

“Whaaat?” Ranta looked at me mockingly. “Parupiro, man, here I thought you were being awfully quiet, and you were asleep on the job? I can’t believe you. A nap in Damuro?! Unbelievable. This is enemy territory, man. Enemy territory. Are you trash?!”

“...Damuro.” My head was foggy, so I didn’t get that angry. “I... was asleep? Huh? But...”

“Nyohoh?” Yume crouched down next to me, peering at my face. “Haru-kun, you were sleepin’? Did you not get enough sleep?”

“Oh... I wonder. Hm...”

“Come to think of it...” Moguzo was sitting on the ground, doing practice swings with his bastard sword. “Haruhiro-kun, you almost never go to sleep before me, do you?”

“I guess?” I murmured. “You might be right about that.”

“Ah! Yume, she may never’ve seen Shihoru’s sleepin’ face! Or maybe she has?”

“Um... I’m not good at getting to sleep. And I tend to wake up early, too.”

“That’s kinda frustratin’. Yume, next time, she’s gonna stay up until you go to sleep. Yume’s gonna look at your sleeping face a whooooole looooot!”

“That’s... fine. Though, when you say it like that, it’s kind of embarrassing.”

“Let me in on this girl talk! No, let me see your sleeping face, too! No, not just your face, your whole sleeping body... Gweheheheh...”

“Ranta, you pervert!” Yume shouted.

“You are the absolute worst,” Shihoru agreed.

“Say whatever you like! I don’t care! Geheheheheh!”

“Ha ha... Ranta-kun, you’re sure resilient...” Moguzo said.

“Moguzo! You could stand to learn from me! You’re a warrior! If you don’t get tough, body and soul, how’re you going to be bait for me?”

“Y-You have a point. Yeah. I’ll do my best.”

“No, don’t!” Yume screamed. “If you ended up actin’ like Ranta, Yume’d hate that!”

“R-Really...?”

“Me, too. No question,” Shihoru agreed.

Manato chuckled, watching everyone banter.

Damuro.

That was right. This was the Old City of Damuro. We had come here, like always, to hunt goblins. Then we’d stopped to take a rest in a crumbling building.

I sat down, and then—I dozed off...? Maybe?

“Is the exhaustion building up?” Manato asked me.

“Oh...” I cocked my head to the side. “Maybe it is. I don’t really know, though. But if I just fell asleep like that, it could be. Hmm.”

“What? Did you have a weird dream?”

“A dream...” I murmured.

That was right.

I felt like... I’d had a dream.

And a rather... intricate—I mean, lengthy—dream, too.

“Manato,” I said quietly, “how long was I out for?”

“Just for a little while, I think. Why?”

“No...”

I felt like... it had been much too long a dream for that to be true.

But I didn't remember what it was about.

Not just barely anything, absolutely nothing.

“It's nothing... I really must just be tired.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, let's call it a day early, then.”

“Huh? But I'm fine. If I made you all head back early, that'd feel kind of awkward...”

“It's not your fault, Haruhiro. It's important to consider our condition. For everyone's sake.”

When he said that so gently, I could hardly refuse. I'd never once felt like pushing back against Manato.

“Why don't we head back to Alterna while it's light out for once, and take it easy?” Manato suggested to all of us.

Ranta grumbled a little, but everyone else was glad. Even Ranta probably wasn't seriously upset; he just wanted to be argumentative. Manato was good at responding to that. It was a trick I couldn't hope to replicate. If Manato weren't around, someone would have long since snapped at Ranta, and something irreversible might have been done.

We left Damuro.

It was my fault, and I did kinda feel bad about it, but honestly, I also felt it was fine to have days like this.

“Should I cook?” Moguzo said on the way back. “We're making it back pretty early, so there's time, and it's cheap.”

“I'll eat at the stalls,” Ranta said.

“Why've you gotta go gettin' in the way of our teamwalk like that, huh?!”

“Yume.” I couldn't help but point this out. “It's work, not walk. Teamwork...”

“Mewww. Was that how it was?”

“Of course it is,” Ranta scoffed. “What’d we be walking for, idiot?”

“Murgh. When Ranta says it, it’s super annoyin’.”

“Then don’t make me say it. If you can, that is!”

“B-But...” Shihoru said hesitantly, “I don’t think a teamwalk would be all that bad an idea...”

“Oh, Shihoru, I was thinking that, too,” said Manato. “All of us walking together. Teamwork is for working, so maybe a teamwalk is a better match for us.”

“I... I know, right? I... I think so, too...”

“Shihoruuuu!” Yume cried.

“Fwah, wh-what?! Yume, th-this is so sudden...”

“You’re the best!”

“S-Sto—Wait, no, if you hug me, I’m going to trip!”

“Wait,” Manato held his hand up, motioning for us all to stop. “Up ahead. There something there.”

We lowered our postures, squinting. He was right. There was something moving on the other side of the field. I was a little surprised. They looked like goblins. It wasn’t Damuro, but they were in a group.

“One... Two... Three... Four... Five... Six of them, huh?” I said. “That’s a lot.”

“Still, though. Those guys look kinda stupid, you know?” Ranta licked his lips, a hand reaching for the hilt of his longsword. “Why don’t we kill ’em? With a surprise attack, it’ll be easy.”

“That’s true, assuming the surprise attack succeeds.” It was the rare occasion where the cautious Moguzo seemed eager. “Maybe it’s doable?”

“Muh...” Yume readied her bow. “They don’t seem to have noticed Yume and everyone, you know?”

“If we’re going to do it,” Shihoru clutched her staff, “we have to decide fast.”

“You’re right.” Was Manato a little hesitant?

He would be. Manato was the one to decide, after all. Who knew how it would play out? Naturally, we would all accept it, but Manato had the heavy responsibility.

Manato looked to me. I doubted he was looking for advice. Surely he was just seeing how I was doing.

Still, if I nodded now, wouldn't Manato make up his mind? That was what I thought. Well, I could at least give him a push from behind. I owed him that much at least.

I was about to nod. Then, something flashed through my mind. Things I might have seen, might have heard. It seemed coherent, yet not, all of it being mashed together. It was hard to explain, but... something caught in my chest, and I had trouble breathing.

There was just one thing I knew. We couldn't do this. It was a mistake.

"Can we not?" I asked. "There're a lot of them. One of them looks awful big, too. I'm not feeling it... I don't think we're ready for this, you could say."

"Huh?!" Ranta came at me. "You're the only one not ready here! Me, I'm raring to go! Now listen—"

"Wah!" Yume pointed at the goblins. "They ran away!"

"She's right." Moguzo sounded a little bit relieved.

Shihoru seemed relieved, too. "Even if we were to chase after them now..."

"We wouldn't make it." Manato laughed a little. "Well, maybe this was for the best? Things happen as they must."

"Tch!" Ranta clicked his tongue and kicked the ground. "Those guys just had their lives spared."

While I watched the goblins go off into the distance, I thought about the long dream that had just come back to me.

Yes. That was a dream. A long dream I had seen in a very short time.

But was it really a dream? How could I say for sure that *this* wasn't the dream?

ex.2

Please, Just a

Little Longer

**Grimgar of
Fantasy and Ash**

Level. Fourteen Plus

WINTER

“Awaken.”

I opened my eyes, feeling like I'd heard someone's voice.

I was in a dark place. Where was this? It wasn't pitch black. There was light. I stood up and looked above me. There were candles affixed to the wall, a line of them stretching far into the distance.

The walls and floor were hard. They were rock. Was this a cave?

If there were candles, this cave had clearly been touched by human hands. A mine shaft, maybe?

There were people. Several of them, in addition to me. More than just two or three. It seemed there were about ten of us lying down, sitting with our backs to the walls, or sitting up.

"Is anyone there?" one person asked.

I reflexively replied, "Uh, yeah."

"I'm here..."

"Yeah."

"I figured as much."

"How many of us are there?"

"Should we count?"

"And... where are we, anyway?"

"Dunno..."

"What? Doesn't anyone know where we are?"

"What's going on?"

"What is this?"

Hearing one voice after another, I thought, *That's strange.*

I didn't know. Didn't know where this was. Why I was here. Who these people with me were.

"Sitting here won't solve anything," one man said, standing up.

"Going somewhere...?" a woman's voice asked.

“Following the wall,” the man answered in a calm tone. “Going to try heading towards the light.”

That man, his hair was white—no, silver?

My eyes met the silver-haired man’s for a moment. He may have just happened to be looking this way. But he looked at me like I was lower than him.

I don’t like it.

Like the silver-haired man, I’d been thinking of following the wall. But he acted faster than I did. It wasn’t that this frustrated me or anything of the sort. That wasn’t it, but—what was it? It gave me a bad feeling.

“I’m going, too,” the woman said.

“Me too, I guess,” someone said.

“H-Hold on, guys! I’m coming, too, then!” called another man.

One man pointed out that the path continued in the direction without candles, too, but no one was going to go that way. I could tell that.

Everyone here was going to follow the man with silver hair. I was going to have no choice but to do the same.

And in the end, that was exactly how it went.

Eventually, we ran into an iron grate door. When the silver-haired man opened the door, the path stretched onwards, and there were stairs leading up.

Still, you know, I’m not that surprised, I thought. That’s kind of strange. I mean, I have no clue what’s up here, but the one thing I do know is that it’s not normal. This is clearly an abnormal situation.

There was another iron grate at the top of the stairs.

The silver haired man pounded on the grate, loudly shouting, “Is nobody there?! Open the door!” A number of the others started shouting, too, until someone opened the iron grate which had apparently been locked.

Whoever it was indicated that we should “Get out.”

When I passed through the door, this time I was a little surprised. I didn’t think much of anything about the stonework room, but the man who’d opened

the door was dressed in a funny way. He wore armor, and a helmet. He even had what looked like a sword hanging at his hip.

What kind of joke was this? Though, the real problem lay beyond that.

Why had I thought, “What kind of joke is this?”

I felt like I could explain, but I couldn’t. Words floated up in the back of my head. Yet before they could surface, they vanished like bubbles.

That was how it felt. It felt pretty unpleasant. This was seriously weird. Which was weirder, what was happening inside me, or what was happening outside me?

The man in armor triggered some sort of mechanism, causing a part of the wall to sink in and an exit to appear.

“Get out.”

When we headed outside, the dimly lit sky stretched out as far as the eye could see. This was the top of a small hill. We had been inside a tower on top of a hill all this time, and we’d just come out of it.

I tried counting our numbers. There were eight men, myself included, and four women. Twelve people in total. Not one of them a familiar face.

I looked to the other side of the hill. There were many buildings packed close together, surrounded by sturdy walls.

“You think that’s a city?” one of them said.

“Rather than a town,” said a thin man wearing black-rimmed glasses, “it’s almost like a castle.”

“A castle...” the sleepy-eyed man whispered to himself.

“Um...” a timid-looking girl asked the sleepy-eyed man, “where is this, do you think?”

“Look, asking me isn’t going to help.”

“...Right, of course. Um, d-does anyone... know? Where is this place?”

The curly-haired man scratched at his curly hair and said, “Seriously?”

“I’ve got it!” said a man who looked like a playboy, clapping his hands together. “Why don’t we just ask that dude?! Y’know, the one who was in, like, armor or whatever!”

When we all turned to look at the tower, the entrance began to close.

“Whoa, whoa, wai—”

Playboy made a run for it. He was too late. The entrance vanished, leaving the spot where it had once been indistinguishable from the surrounding wall.

Playboy tried touching and hitting the wall in all sorts of places, but soon enough he slumped to the ground, dejected.

“Well, this is a problem,” said a girl with her long hair in two braids. She said the word “problem” with a funny accent.

Is she from xxxxxx? I wondered. —xxxxxx...? *It’s no good. It won’t come to me.*

“You said it,” replied Curly, crouching down, “Seriously...? Seriously?”

“And, now, with that perfect tiiiiiiiming!” a high-pitched woman’s voice rang out. “I appear, you know. I take the stage, you know. Where am I? I’m right heeeere!”

“Right where?!” cried Playboy, standing up and shouting.

“Don’t paaaanic! Don’t be alaaaarmed! But, still, don’t relaaaax. Don’t pull out your hair, eiiiither!”

From the shadow of the tower, a woman with her hair in twintails poked her head out, singing a strange tune. “Charararararahn, charararararahnrrarahn. Heeeey. Is everyone feeling fiiiine? Welcome to Grimgar. I’m your guide, Hiyomuuuu. Nice to meet youuuu. Let’s get along? Kyapii!”

“What an annoying speech style,” a man with a buzz-cut said, grinding his back teeth.

“Eek!” Hiyomu ducked her head back into the tower, but soon stuck it out again. “You’re so scary. So dangerous. Don’t get so maaaad. Okay? Okay? Okay? Okay?”

Buzz-Cut clicked his tongue in distaste. “Then don’t piss me off.”

“Yes, sirreeee!” Hiyomu hopped out next to the tower, raising her hand in a salute. “I’ll be careful from now on, sir! I’ll be reeeeeal careful, sir? Is this okay? It’s okay, right? Teehee.”

“You’re doing that on purpose, aren’t you?”

“Aw, you could teeeell? Ah, ah! Don’t get mad! Don’t punch me, don’t kick me! I don’t like being hurt! Generally, I want you to be niiiice to me! Anyway, is it okay if I move things along now? Can I do my job now?”

“Hurry it up,” said Silver Hair in a low, menacing voice.

“All righty, then,” Hiyomu began with an undaunted grin. “I’m gonna do my job now, okay? For now, just follow after meeee. Don’t get left behiiiiind!”

Hiyomu walked along the well-trodden, black dirt path that led down the hill. There was grass on either side of the path. But it wasn’t just a grassy field. There were tens, hundreds, or maybe more, large white stones lined up.

“Hey, are those...” Curly asked, pointing at the white stones. “Could they be... graves?”

“Hee hee heeee,” Hiyomu giggled without turning around. “I wondeeeer. Well, don’t you worry about that now. Don’t wooorry. It’s too soon for any of you. I hope it’s too soon for any of youuuu. Hee hee hee...”

Buzz-Cut clicked his tongue in distaste again, kicking the dirt. He was ready to snap, but it looked like he planned to follow Hiyomu.

Silver Hair was already walking. Glasses, a woman in flashy clothes, and another much more petite girl followed him.

Playboy shouted, “Whoa! Me too, me too! Me too!” and began chasing after them, then tripped.

I turned back to the tower. If I didn’t follow Hiyomu, and I ran off instead, what would happen?

“Ah...” The sleepy-eyed man groaned. “...It’s red.”

The timid-looking girl gulped audibly.

“Ahh,” said the girl with braids. “Mr. Moon is red. That’s super pretty.”

A red moon? That was absurd.

But it was true.

It was somewhere between a half and a crescent moon, maybe.

The moon hanging in the slightly bright sky was so red that it seemed unreal.

Curly said, "Whoa..."

An awfully large man let out a low groan.

It's different, I thought. This place, it's different.

The moon, it's red.

This must be a different place. I'm sure of it.

Isn't this what I was hoping for?

For some reason, I felt that was true.



1. Even if I Don't Understand

The sleepy-eyed man was Haruhiro.

The curly-haired one was Ranta.

The big guy was Moguzo.

The timid girl was Shihoru.

The easygoing guy was Kikkawa.

And I was Manato.

Talking as we walked, I managed to figure that much out.

Though, maybe I should say that was *all* I managed to figure out.

Not only did we not know anything about this place where the moon was red, we didn't even know about ourselves. Still, we could all give our names. We could say our height and weight, too. It was just that, if we went for anything more specific—about where we were born, about our families, if we had any friends—we *couldn't reach* that information.

It felt like it was there, but reach as we might, we couldn't touch it. When our fingertips touched it, it slipped away. There was a region like that inside our heads. We couldn't access the memories there. That was how it felt.

Hiyomu led us to the office of the Volunteer Soldier Corps of the Alterna Frontier Army, Red Moon, then immediately took off.

The office was like a bar, and someone with green hair, a cleft chin, light blue eyes, thick makeup, and lipstick—a man—was waiting for us with his elbows resting on the counter.

"Hm..." He nodded to himself a number of times as he scrutinized us. "Very nice. Come here, my little kittens. Welcome. I'm Britney. I'm the chief and host here at the office of Red Moon, the Volunteer Soldier Corps of the Alterna Frontier Army. You can call me Chief, but Bri-chan is fine, too. Though, if you do call me that, make sure you say it with lots of love, okay?"

"Chief." Silver Hair walked up to the counter, cocking his head to one side.

“Answer my questions. I know that this town is called Alterna. But what is this Frontier Army and Volunteer Soldier Corps stuff about? Why am I here? Do you know?”

“You’ve got spunk. I’ve got a thing for boys like you. What’s your name?”

“It’s Renji. And I hate fags like you.”

“Oh, do you now...” In an instant, Britney had pressed a knife against Renji’s throat, his eyes narrowing threateningly. “Renji, let me give you a tip. Nobody who calls me a fag lives for long. You look like a clever boy; I think you catch my meaning. Or do you want to try it again?”

“Well,” Renji said, seizing the knife’s blade with his bare hand. “I never wanted a long life, and I don’t care to give in to threats. If you think you can take me, do it, Chief Fag.”

“In due time,” Britney replied, licking his lips and stroking Renji’s cheek. “I’ll take you hard. As many times as I like. And when I’m done, you’ll never be able to forget me.”

Ranta, Haruhiro, and the girl with braids were whispering something between themselves.

I couldn’t take my eyes off Renji. He was a man of steady nerves. Was it confidence? He’d probably seen his share of fights.

“Well, anyway!” Kikkawa got between Renji and Britney. “It’s our first meeting! There are bound to be misunderstandings! Let’s settle this peacefully! Let’s try to get along and be cheery? Okay? Okay? In deference to my good looks!”

“Your good looks?” Renji snorted derisively as he let go of the knife.

“Looks like we have a few reckless ones here,” Britney said, withdrawing his knife. “Eight men, four women. There aren’t quite enough women, but I prefer it that way, and men are more likely to be useful in battle anyway, so it’s no problem.”

I furrowed my brow. “In battle?”

“Right,” Britney said with a smile. It was creepy, to be frank. “Useful in

battle.”

“This is a Volunteer Soldier office,” I said, looking down. “So, does that mean we’re becoming volunteer soldiers or something?”

“Oh, my!” Britney clapped artificially. “You’ve got some promise, too. That’s exactly it. You’re all going to be volunteer soldiers. You do have some freedom to decide, though, y’know?”

“Master Choice,” Haruhiro said, slapping Ranta on the back. “You’re up.”

“O-Oh?! I... I am, aren’t I?! Aren’t... I...?”

From what Britney told us, this land known as the frontier was populated by humans and a lot of hostile races. The Frontier Army’s duty was to drive them out and make the frontier human territory.

They didn’t have the numerical advantage, and they were actually at a disadvantage, so the Frontier Army was stretched just to maintain Alterna and their front line outposts. That was where the Frontier Army’s detached force, the Volunteer Corps, came in.

“We volunteer soldiers,” Britney told us, “appear suddenly and unexpectedly, infiltrating enemy territory left and right, surveying, causing confusion, and finding ways to weaken opposing forces. Though we cooperate with the main force, we very rarely engage in organized operations. Most volunteer soldiers act alone, or in small parties of 3-6 people, I think. Anyway, we use our own individual skills and judgment to gather intel and strike the enemy. That is the way the Volunteer Soldier Corps, Red Moon, works.”

He went on to explain that if we became volunteer soldiers, we’d be given a Trainee Badge that identified us as volunteer soldier trainees, and 10 silver coins, worth 10 Silver. So money, in other words. If we didn’t, what happened to us wasn’t his problem.

We technically had the freedom to choose. Though only technically. No idiot would choose to be thrown out, penniless, into an unknown place. No matter how you looked at it, we had no choice but to become volunteer soldiers.

“Fair enough.” The first one to take a Trainee Badge and leather pouch full of silver coins was Renji, of course. “I don’t know about this volunteer soldier

business or whatever, but I'll do it. We'll talk after that."

He really did always beat me to the punch. What was with that?

After Renji, the buzz-cut man and flashy woman reached for their Trainee Badges and leather pouches. I was fourth. After me was Glasses.

When Kikkawa said, "Okay then, I'm getting in on this, too!" and went to take two pouches, Britney slapped his hand. "Hey!"

That left Haruhiro and Ranta, Moguzo, Shihoru, the girl with braids, and the petite girl. What point was there in drawing this out?

Though maybe theirs was the more normal reaction.

"What about you?" Britney pressed them on it.

Ranta was the first to approach the counter. "I dunno... I feel like I'm about to get screwed here. I've got a vaguely bad feeling about all this..."

"Hmm." The girl with braids followed behind Ranta. "Where there's a will-will, there's a way-way, they say..."

"No," Haruhiro shook his head. "I don't think anybody says will-will or way-way..."

"Oh? They don't? Yume's always said it with will-will and way-way."

"You learned it wrong then. It's just 'where there's a will, there's a way.'"

"Oh. But it sounds cuter with will-will and way-way. Yume thinks cute is important, too."

"It definitely does sound cuter that way."

"Doesn't it, though?"

The girl with braids was called Yume, it seemed.

The petite girl, Haruhiro, and Moguzo all took Trainee Badges, too. That was everyone.

"Congratulations," Britney said, smiling and clapping. "Now, all of you are volunteer soldier trainees. Work hard and learn to stand on your own quickly. Once you're—"

I was only half-listening at this point as I thought about what to do next.

Britney had said it was common to form parties of three to six. Well, it did seem like it'd be hard to do alone. First, I'd have to get the ones who seemed like they could fight together. Who and who?

When I went to look, Renji acted before I could again.

But punching Buzz-Cut out of nowhere? What in the world was he thinking?

"Get up," Renji said.

"You jerk!" Buzz-Cut shouted and tried to get up, only for Renji to immediately kick him, sending him sprawling across the floor.

"What's wrong? Get up."

"What's your problem, you ass?"

"From the first time I saw you, I wondered which of us was stronger. It's time for me to show you the answer. Get up."

"Dammit...!"

Buzz-Cut got mad, and Renji pummeled him mercilessly. It was completely one-sided. With a headbutt as the finisher, Buzz-Cut collapsed.

No, he didn't. He only fell to one knee, bearing the pain.

Renji wiped the blood from his forehead with one finger. "You've got a hard head. Tell me your name."

"...It's Ron. Damn, you're strong."

"You're pretty tough yourself. Come with me, Ron."

"Yeah. I'll stick with you for now."

"Good. Now, who else..." Renji looked around the office, stopping on me.

Ron was first, and I was second, huh?

Oh, screw you, was something I didn't think. But Renji could tell.

He looked away from me, eyeing Glasses instead. "You look like you could be useful. Come with me."

Glasses crossed his arms, thinking it over a little before nodding. “Sure. I’m Adachi. It’s a pleasure, Renji.”

I let out a little sigh. He kept taking things from me.

Why? What was it that made Renji one step faster than me?

It was that Renji didn’t hesitate. Because I stopped to think things over, I was a step behind. That might have been it.

“You there, Chibi.”

“Aye...?”

But this one was a big surprise. Renji was choosing that petite girl.

“Come.”

When he gestured for her to follow, the petite girl tottered over in his direction, and looked up at Renji.

He patted her on the head. “You look like you’ll be useful. Come along.”

“...Aye.”

While I looked at the petite girl’s face, which had turned a deep shade of red, I desperately tried to figure out why. *What? What criteria did Renji choose her based on? That she’d be useful in battle? Her physical strength? Her intelligence? No, that’s not it. Or, at least, that’s not all there was to it. What, then...?*

“We’re going.” Renji took Ron, Adachi, and the petite girl with him as they went to leave the office.

Four people. Is just four people enough?

“Wait!” the flashy woman called after Renji. “Take me, too!”

“I don’t need any useless baggage.”

“I’ll do anything!” Flashy said, clinging to Renji. “I’m Sassa. Please. Absolutely anything, I’ll do it.”

“Absolutely anything, huh?” Renji said, shoving Sassa away violently.

In that instant, I saw it. It was only slightly, but Renji smiled.

“Don’t forget those words.”

I get. That makes sense.

It was loyalty. Not whether they would be an asset in battle. That was important, of course, but it was whether he could make them obey him or not.

Would they submit to him? That was what Renji looked for. At this stage, he already had an image in his mind. He was trying to build up a team with him at the center.

When Renji left the office with Team Renji, Kikkawa said something and headed out, too.

“Well, I’m off, too,” I said.

For now, I didn’t want to stick around. It felt like I’d been left behind, and I didn’t like it. Right now, I wanted to get outside as soon as I could. That was how I felt, but for some reason, I was smiling.

“I won’t learn anything staying here, so I’m going outside to look around.” I smiled at the five losers. Then, like it was no big deal, I added, “See you all later.”

“Yeah, see you.” Haruhiro was waving.

He must want to come along, I thought. Well, he should, then. Why doesn’t he? Because no one else is? Is that a reason? I don’t understand.

I left the office. I was frustrated, but when I touched my face, it still had a smile plastered to it.

What is this? Just what kind of person am I...?

2. Getting a Feel For it

While I was walking around Alterna, I learned some things about myself.

I was so personable that even I was shocked. I could strike up a conversation with anyone, and even if I didn’t mean to at the time, I’d end up smiling. In most cases, it seemed everyone else had a positive impression of me.

I didn’t know anything, and everything was new to me. Not only was I not

afraid of this situation, I was starting to like it.

I saw a certain figure at a distance in the plaza. He looked lost.

I just get a vague sense of that, but I guess that's how it is, I thought. That's not bad, in its own way.

"Haruhiro!" I called.

"Huh?" Haruhiro came running straight at me. "Manato...! Manato! I'm trying to make my way back to the office, but I can't find it! Meeting you here feels like stumbling across the Buddha in Hell!"

"You're exaggerating," I said. With a smile, of course. "Haruhiro, are you alone? Are there any others?"

"Yeah. Ranta, Shihoru and Yume are in front of the office... or should be. Shihoru started crying, see. After that, we agreed that I was going to go gather information while they waited there."

"Oh, so that's it. So, you figured out a bunch of stuff, and you're on the way back now?"

"Well... I don't know that anything I figured out counts as figuring stuff out. What was there... the Yorozu Deposit Company, maybe...?"

"Yorozu? Deposit Company? I don't know about those yet."

"No way. Seriously? It's a place where you can deposit your money, or have it converted. It seemed kinda important. Oh, also, there was a good meat skewer place in the market... Nah, that one's not so important."

"I took a peek at the marketplace a bit myself. So there are meat skewers there, huh? If they're as good as you say, I'd like to try one."

"I'll show you the place. I remember exactly where it was. ...Though I forgot the way back to the office."

"Okay, should we go together, then?" *I'm amazed I can say these things, I thought, but it came out so easily. This had to just be the kind of person I was.* "I was just thinking of heading back to the office."

"Huh...?" Haruhiro seemed to be stunned silent.

Yeah, I guess it made sense that he would be.

I did say something like, “See you all later,” but I wouldn’t blame him for thinking that was just me being polite.

I was, after all. Not that I’d tell him that. It seemed this was just the kind of guy I was.

“Hm? Is something wrong?” I asked.

“N-Nothing at all, actually! L-Let’s go. To the office. I don’t care about Ranta, but I’m sure Shihoru and Yume are feeling alone and helpless.”

Like that, I ended up forming a party with the leftovers: Haruhiro, Ranta, Shihoru, Yume, and Moguzo.

Haruhiro was unreliable, Ranta was noisy, Shihoru was awfully timid, Yume was an airhead, and Moguzo was slow. The five of them had more weak points than strong ones.

But I hadn’t lost hope. That wasn’t me putting up a strong front. I was honestly enjoying myself.

It was a mystery to me as to why. I mean, if I was going to team up with this group, I was going to have to decide everything, and when it came to Ranta, he wouldn’t even listen.

Like, here was a thing that happened.

The first thing volunteer soldier trainees do is join a guild and receive training in a job. So, looking at their aptitude, I decided Haruhiro would be a thief, Shihoru would be a mage, Yume would be a hunter, and Ranta would be a warrior.

But then Ranta went and became a dread knight.

If Moguzo, who’d already become a warrior, hadn’t joined the party, what would have happened to us?

So long as a party has its two pillars, the priest and the warrior, the rest can, frankly, be just about anything. This was something anyone who listened even a little would know, and my comrades didn’t understand it. They weren’t even thinking through things in the first place.

Hilarious, wasn't it?

I doubt Renji could have taken it.

He'd put together an easy team to work with, so he wouldn't have to. He would make all the decisions himself, and use the rest as pawns. That was probably how that man operated. It was efficient, after all. I think it was the right way.

But it seemed I was different. If I left them to their own devices, no one tried to lead the way, so I was forced to take point, but seeing no one in front of me didn't feel right.

While we searched the forests near Alterna for goblins or ghouls, I kept feeling something was off.

Maybe this wasn't supposed to be my position.

If I thought about it, I'd struggled to choose between warrior or priest, and then settled on priest. The priest's role was to treat the wounded. The warrior had to stand on the front line, protecting his comrades, and also draw in the enemy and slay them. I'd tried to have Ranta do that.

I had a reason, of course. Ranta was short, but he had stamina, and he was speedy. His personality was defective, but he had an indomitable spirit, and there was a part of him that loved being around people. Guys like him had a hard time abandoning others.

I had considered being the warrior myself, but I'd felt like Ranta would handle it just fine, too.

Ultimately, I had failed to read Ranta's selfishness and freewheeling nature. That was a mistake on my part, but someone needed to fill the warrior and priest roles. Shihoru was too sensitive, and Yume was too out of it, for me to trust either of them to do it. Haruhiro, too. His personality probably wasn't suited to being a warrior. And Ranta as priest was unthinkable.

Which meant our warrior was Ranta.

That wasn't the only option, no. I didn't think Haruhiro as priest would have been that bad, which was why I would have been fine with being the warrior.

But that wasn't the choice I made.

Renji had surely become a warrior. And Team Renji's priest was with me at the guild, so I knew who that was. It was the petite girl.

I had probably planned to be the priest from the beginning, leaving the role of warrior to someone else.

Was it that I didn't want to be in the line of fire? Was it that I was scared? No, that wasn't it...

Ranta suddenly jumped up.

"Wha?! Wh-What?! W-Whoa?!"

When I looked, there was a beast about the size of a cat, with its body covered in needle-like hair, trying to cling on to Ranta's leg, and scratching him.

"A pit rat," said Yume, looking around. "Pit rats are supposed to attack in packs, so there may be more around here."

"They're here...!" I quickly spotted another pit rat, and I took a swing at it with my staff, but it dodged. "Urkh! They're too quick!"

"Hey! H-Help me out here, guys! Helping me should be first priority! H-Help! Somebody heeeelp!"

"Fight, dread knight!" Haruhiro drew his dagger, swinging it down at the pit rats. That missed, too. "Animals are fast...!"

"Hunggh!" Moguzo's bastard sword nearly scored a blow on Ranta instead of the pit rat.

"Eeek! M-Moguzo, damn it! Are you trying to kill me?! Dammit! Dammit, dammit! My allies are trying to kill me, I'm still being targeted, nothing is going my way...!"

Moguzo looked really apologetic, but he couldn't say anything.

Haruhiro tried to kick the pit rat, but it dodged again. "Moguzo was trying to help you! Be grateful!" he shouted.

"He didn't help at all! Rahhhh, Hatred! Wha? My dread knight skill! It missed...?!"

“Don’t use skills recklessly! Ugh, jeez...!”

Oh, wow. This is a mess. How many rats are there? Five? Six? I exhaled. *I need to calm down first. Yeah, this isn’t scary. At all. I don’t think I’m even flustered.*

“Marc em Parc.” Shihoru drew elemental sigils with her staff while chanting, triggering the magic spell Magic Missile.

Her eyes are still closed. That’s bad, isn’t it? I thought, and lo and behold, the bead of light shot from the tip of Shihoru’s staff to strike Ranta square in the back of the head.

“Gwah?!”

“Huh?! I-I’m sorry! I...”

“You bitch! I’m gonna kill you! Actually, no, just let me grope you...!” Ranta rubbed the back of his head, getting ready to assault Shihoru.

Oh, come on, seriously? I’m gonna have to do something.

I swept Ranta’s legs out from under him with my short staff. He stumbled forward with a grunt and tripped. It looked like I was going to have to teach him a lesson.

“What are you doing?!” I shouted at Ranta, meaning to give him a piece of my mind, but a pit rat came at me. I tried to hit it, but I missed.

These little guys really are fast. This’s getting interesting.

“I-If we could just get a little!” Yume was swinging her machete around wildly. “If we could just get a little damage in! Master said most animals’ll run off if you can do that, so everyone do your best!”

That made sense. They weren’t playing around. In a battle to secure food and keep living, getting wounded was absolutely forbidden.

While I was following the pit rats with my eyes, impressed by them, Moguzo’s bastard sword struck a tree, showering him with bugs and leaves. “Hunggh! Whuh?!” he cried out in surprise.

That was just too funny. No, but this wasn’t time for me to be amused.

“This is going nowhere!” Haruhiro suddenly dropped to one knee and lowered

his posture.

Huh. Wow. He's baiting them.

Using his own arm as bait, it looked like he was deliberately planning to let them bite him. But, before that could happen, a different pit rat tore into Haruhiro's right shin.

"Yowwwch...?!" Haruhiro hollered, trying to shake it off, but the initial pit rat bit his right arm. "Ouch!"

"Haruhiro...!" I called. *Nice one!* Haruhiro's scheme had, in a way, succeeded. I took aim at the two pit rats biting Haruhiro. "Don't move...!"

With one strike of my short staff, the pit rats squealed. But that needle-like hair was tricky. It absorbed the impact, so it wasn't that effective. The two pit rats quickly recovered and took off running. Maybe they were sensing it was time to give up? The other pit rats vanished, too.

When I was treating him, Haruhiro was surprised to see light magic for the first time.

"Awesome... Thank you, Manato. You ended up being the one to drive off the rats in the end, too."

"Thanks to you acting as live bait for them, Haruhiro."

"Nah, the plan was to use my arm as bait, then handle them myself..."

"Sure... But, you know, all's well that ends well."

Honestly, it wasn't a bad result.

It looks like I've been underestimating Haruhiro, I thought. If I'm being blunt, the one who made a decisive move was Haruhiro. Using his own arm as bait. Even if you can think of it, it's not so easy to put the idea into action. That means he can commit. He's got the ability to make decisions.

The problem is, he doesn't look like he does. If he were sharper, it would be easy to pivot around him. He's got a strong tendency to need to rely on others, too. He's clearly depending on me.

Whatever the case, we got results. Haste makes waste. Best not rush things.

The next day we searched the forest again, and we found a small spring. There was a mud goblin there.

With some subtle guidance, I had Haruhiro serve as our scout. He was the one closest to the spring.

When Haruhiro nodded, I nodded back. When I was about to give the signal to come back—Haruhiro raised his right hand, and swung down.

Come on, there's no need to be hasty. Oh, too late.

Ranta charged forward with a battle cry. Naturally, the mud goblin noticed us, and tried to flee.

“There!” Yume shouted and immediately loosed an arrow, which stabbed into the ground ahead of where the mud goblin was going.

Thanks to that, it stopped.

The mud goblin was unarmed. That didn't mean it wasn't dangerous, but I decided to watch and see.

Haruhiro used Slap with his dagger. That scratched it. The mud goblin was stuck in the spring for a bit, but it quickly went on the counterattack.

Haruhiro narrowly dodged.

Ranta's Hatred was too blatant, so it missed.

The mud goblin performed a jump kick on Ranta, knocking him down. That looked a bit dangerous.

I took a thrust at the mud goblin's shoulder as it was about to jump on Ranta, driving it off.

Shihoru was trying to cast a spell with her eyes closed again, but Ranta stopped her. She needed to work on that habit.

“Moguzo, get in front of the mud gob!” I ordered. “Everyone else, surround it! Don't let it get away!”

“Yeah!” Moguzo's response wasn't bad. He immediately positioned himself in front of the mud gob, stabbing the blade of his bastard sword at it.

“F-Fine, guess I'll have to, huh?!” Ranta moved to the right side of the mud

gob. I was on the left. Haruhiro and Yume, who had dropped her bow and pulled her machete, were to the rear. Now the mud gob had nowhere to run.

This should do, for a start, I thought. “Moguzo! Pile on the pressure! Pressure! More pressure!”

“Hunnnggh!”

“Hey!”

Ranta and Moguzo are taking the lead well, I thought—but then the mud goblin shrieked and threw a dried branch at Ranta.

It was only a branch, but Ranta backed away with an exaggerated, “Whoa?!”

Is he stupid? I thought with exasperation. *That’ll break our encirclement. I won’t let it happen, though.*

I immediately stepped in to clobber the mud gob’s shoulder with my short staff.

Was that what made the mud gob snap? It turned on me and let out a terrible scream.

Is it coming? I readied myself. But it didn’t come. *Is it acting tough? It might be scared of us. Well, of course it is. We have it outnumbered.*

“G-Guys!” Ranta licked his lips over and over. “Don’t get cold feet on me now! It’s kill or be killed! I’m gonna murder this thing and accumulate vice...!”

You’re the one getting cold feet, Ranta.

“Stay cautious...!” I said as I stepped in, smacking the mud gob in the head with my short staff. It drew blood, and the mud gob hissed and glared at me, swinging both its arms around.

This guy’s desperate, too. I guess that should be obvious.

“Gobsy’s a real tough guy, huh...” Yume’s voice was wavering.

Moguzo moved up. “Umph! Umph!” he swung his bastard sword, making the mud gob back away.

When it did, Haruhiro and Yume were there.

“Th-This one’s ours, Haru-kun!”

“Y-Yeahhh...!”

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhhhh!”

“Urkh...” Haruhiro seemed to be intimidated by the mud gob’s wailing, but he swung wildly with his dagger.

It hit the mud gob’s right arm. It went pretty deep.

He could have pushed in deeper, but Haruhiro cried out in surprise and pulled back his dagger. What was he doing?

“Ugyahgyah!” The mud gob splattered blood everywhere, spinning around on the spot. It was just struggling in vain now. “Gyah! Ugyahgyah!”

It was wounded, so we really couldn’t let our guard down now. We just had to calmly press the attack.

However, no one tried to touch it. Their breathing was ragged. Well, I was a bit winded, too. Was it because of the abnormal situation?

“What’s with this...?” Haruhiro muttered to himself weakly. He had a look on his face like his heart was about to break.

“Lives are at stake here...!” I shouted. If I didn’t motivate them, we were in trouble. “There are lives at stake here! Ours, and its! The goblin is serious! It doesn’t get any more deadly serious than this! There’s no way it’s going to be easy! Because no person, no living being, wants to die!”

“Marc em Parc...!” The first to act was Shihoru. You could say that was surprising.

The bead of light struck the mud gob square in the face. It howled in pain and confusion.

“Now!” I commanded, striking the mud gob.

Ranta brought down his longsword, burying it in the mud gob’s right shoulder. “—That’s hard! Was that bone?!”

“Hung...!” Moguzo went for a big swing.

The mud gob still had Ranta’s longsword stabbed into it, so it couldn’t escape

anymore.

Moguzo's bastard sword did a magnificent job of crushing the mud gob's head.

It collapsed, and Ranta pumped his fist with a "Hell, yeah!"

I figured we had to be done at this point. No one would expect the mud gob to get up so quickly in that state.

"...You've gotta be kiddin' me," Yume stared in disbelief.

It wasn't kidding.

"Wha...?!" I cried out in surprise and tried to trip it with my short staff.

That was because the mud gob took off running. Not just that, it managed to jump over my staff. I was flabbergasted.

"That's pushing your luck!" If Haruhiro hadn't caught the mud gob's right leg with his foot and tripped it, it might have gotten away.

No, probably not. It was hurt too badly. Its strength would have failed before it got too far.

Moguzo bellowed, winding up his bastard sword to strike, but Ranta cut ahead of him.

"Out of my way, Moguzo! I'll strike the killing blow...!"

He didn't so much cut it as hit it. And hit it. And hit it.

"Wahahahahahahahaha!" Ranta laughed maniacally. "Lord Skullhell! Did you see that?! To accumulate vice, a dread knight takes life from a living being and offers a part of its body at the guild altar, see! The ears are a bit big, so maybe a claw will do— Wait, whoa?!"

Ahh. Yeah... that's right. It's not done yet.

It's still breathing. The mud gob isn't dead.

It's trying to crawl away. Even though it's hopeless.

Shihoru let out a sob, on the verge of bursting into tears.

"Guess it doesn't want to die, huh..." Yume put her hands together in prayer.

“Rest in peace...”

“No...” Haruhiro corrected her in a quiet voice. “It’s not dead yet...”

Is this what it’s like? I don’t know if it’s our enemy or what, but is this what it’s like to kill? This is it.

“We have to finish it,” I raised my staff to swing. “Otherwise... we’ll only prolong its suffering.”

I slammed my short staff into the mud gob’s brainstem. That made it stop moving. It wasn’t breathing anymore.

I did as I’d learned in the priests’ guild, closing my eyes and making the sign of the hexagram.

It weighed on you. Taking a life with your own hands. But not so much that it was crushing.

If this is it, I can do this, I thought. I was more or less fine. Honestly, my uncertainties were gone now. I had thought it would be harder. But it wasn’t, really.

If this had been a human, it would have probably been tough. But it wasn’t human, so even if it left a bad aftertaste, I’d get used to it in no time.

I could keep doing this.

But could *we*?

3. Keep Walking

After taking down the mud goblin, we had no income for the next three days, and the general mood of the party was only getting worse.

That was just how it went, but we couldn’t leave things like this. Everyone surely knew that, but no one was trying to break the status quo. I’d have to be the one to do it.

At night, in our room at the lodging house, I sat up.

“...Manato?” someone called out to me.

It was Haruhiro. He still wasn't asleep?

"Yeah," I said.

"You're up? It's still night. Or rather, the night has only just started. Running to the washroom or something?"

"Nah." I got out of bed. "I'm going out for a bit. I probably don't need to say this, but I'll be coming back, so don't worry."

"Huh. You're going out... at this time of night?"

"The night's just getting started," I said with my usual smile. "See you later. You must be tired. Don't wait up for me. Go ahead and sleep."

"Oh, okay."

If I didn't invite him, Haruhiro wouldn't come. That was a bit frustrating, but not unexpected. Still, since he at least had some sense of the danger we were in, Haruhiro was better than the rest.

I left the lodging house, heading for Flower Garden Street. There was a place there, Sherry's Tavern, which was a hangout for volunteer soldiers.

On my way there, I was hassled by girls acting as touts for other places, but I brushed them off and headed for the tavern I was looking for.

The liveliness of the crowd, for some reason, made me feel nostalgic. Was I used to places like this? It sure was inconvenient not knowing my own past.

Walking with relaxed steps, I looked around the tavern, only for a familiar face to catch my eye.

That silver hair. Sitting at the counter alone. It was Renji.

I sat down next to Renji. "Hey."

Renji took one glance at me, but didn't say a thing.

I asked one of the waitresses who came by what drinks were on the menu and what they cost.

When I went to order, Renji shook his own glass.

"More of this." He pushed a silver coin into the hand of the confused woman.

“Two glasses.”

The woman must have been intimidated, because she clutched the silver coin and beat a hasty retreat.

I smiled, the same as ever. “Sorry to trouble you.”

“Are you really?” Renji said with a slight smile.

I shook my head. “Nope.”

“Didn’t think so.”

“You’re doing well for yourself.”

“Unlike you trash.”

“You don’t mince words.”

“Because it’s the truth.”

“Did you buy me a drink as a put-down?”

“I feel sorry for you.” Renji drained his glass. “I don’t know what you’re thinking. Scraping together that bunch of scum. What are you trying to do?”

“Scum, huh?” I was mad. But not mad enough to snap at him. If anything, I was wondering, *Why is Renji poking at me like this?*

If you looked at our situations, Renji, who could afford to buy my drinks, should have had more composure. I mean, if you compared us, it made everything I did look worthless. I was close to the bottom, in the worst position. Despite that, I wasn’t that pessimistic about it, while Renji was really irritated. Maybe things weren’t going quite how he had planned.

“Must be hard, being a perfectionist,” I said.

“Don’t talk like you would know.”

“I don’t know you, Renji. Not at all.”

“I’ll bet.”

“You don’t know me, either, though.”

“Oh, I know,” Renji said without looking at me. “That smile is just a veneer. You’re a piece of shit who doesn’t even see people as human. You don’t trust

anyone. You have no expectations for anyone, or anything. That's how you can keep that stupid grin on your face, right?"

"When you say that, I'm starting to feel that way, too."

"I can say it with certainty. That's the kind of guy you are."

"If you were to put it in one word, I'm a monster?" I asked.

"Yeah, that's right."

"Be that as it may, it's pathetic taking out your frustrations on other people, Renji."

Renji was about to click his tongue, then stopped. After that, the drinks he'd ordered came, and until he'd finished he didn't say a word to me.

"Well, good luck out there, Trash Commander," Renji said and stood up from his seat.

It was so funny, I laughed.

Even though I was laughing, the things Renji had said stayed sunk in like body blows.

I didn't trust people? I had no expectations? Could I say, definitively, that it wasn't the case? Did I even need to trust them to begin with? Was there something wrong with having no expectations of other people? My smile was just a veneer, but so what?

Renji was a better guy than appearances would suggest, I thought, and I found that hilarious.

Here I was, alone, chuckling to myself. I might have been a bad guy. And I might not have gotten along with Renji. But if Renji were a little denser, we could have gotten along fine.

To put it bluntly, I could have deceived Renji, manipulated him. But it was no good. Renji had seen through me. If I were to work with him, we'd have to jostle for position.

If Renji and I teamed up, our overall power might go up, but it would make everything a hassle. I don't think I, or Renji, had the composure for that.

Renji had instinctively understood that. And, well, I was the same. That was how we'd gotten here.

"But I still don't understand, Renji," I whispered before downing the rest of the hard liquor.

The truth was, I still didn't really understand what kind of person I was. Why would that be? I was starting to have fun.

They were scum, huh? I was a Trash Commander? Well, hey, what was wrong with that? I couldn't think of how, but I'd rise from here. I'd catch up to Team Renji, and overtake them.

If I could do that, it'd feel really good, I was sure. I wanted to see the chagrin on Renji's face.

I was a monster, huh? Maybe. I didn't have a good understanding of myself yet, but I was slowly beginning to see.

For now, I needed to make money. I was starting from nothing, or, if you looked at the sad state of the resources available to me, less than nothing. But I hadn't been wasting my time. At the very least, I had a grasp of what Haruhiro and the rest were like.

Now it was time to get serious.

I gathered information in Sherry's Tavern. Ingratiating myself with the senior volunteer soldiers was a cinch. It was too inefficient to prowl the forest looking for mud goblins, so was there a good hunting ground somewhere?

I soon found one. If I made the suggestion, no one was likely to object, so that basically decided it. That's how it actually went, too.

We started going to the Old City of Damuro regularly. Our targets were the goblins living there.

If you were to talk about the enemies of humanity, there were orcs, undead, gray elves, kobolds, goblins, and so on, and so forth.

Goblins were built smaller than humans, and weren't especially clever. Frankly, they were looked down upon even on the enemy side, and the whole race was treated like cannon fodder.

That was why goblins were pushed off into a corner of the vast frontier, and they had to make Damuro, so close to the human domain, their home.

What was more, the center of goblin power was only the New City of Damuro. The eastern part, the Old City, had been abandoned to rot.

The goblins of the Old City were not what you'd call mainstream goblins. They were outcasts, with no place in the New City.

Honestly, could there have been more suitable prey for us? I don't mean that ironically; I honestly felt that way.

Making money. That was our main objective, but there was one more thing, something I felt was important.

Experiencing success.

If we didn't see a continuous sequence of concrete successes, we couldn't become confident that we would be able to do this. We would need to fight, and win. We needed to develop a habit of winning.

To do that, we'd beat up on weak enemies. That said, if they were too weak, there would be no point. They had to feel challenging, yet be just weak enough.

In what I had heard, asking around, the outcast goblins of the Old City of Damuro were the perfect opponents for us.

I left the scouting to Haruhiro. Haruhiro was cautious, and not prone to mood swings. He could keep going without getting tired of all the little things. He was pretty dependent on me, but that was just because he'd been thrown into an unfamiliar situation, and he was uneasy. Essentially, he was the type that could act independently in the right circumstances.

With those sleepy eyes, he looked like he might be a bit uncooperative, but he was actually surprisingly meek. I felt like he could stand to be more cunning.

I always had Moguzo, making use of the physique he was naturally blessed with, stand on the front line. I had figured out Moguzo's weakness. When he got flustered, he'd get into an unstable stance. Then, rather than swinging around his bastard sword, the weight of his sword would swing him around.

I knew he had the strength for it, so what he needed to do was keep his

center of gravity low and swing with his full body.

When I quietly gave him that advice, there was a clear improvement in the way he moved.

At first glance, Moguzo looked like a bit of a dullard, but that wasn't true at all. If he just became a bit more stable emotionally, he would be able to do fairly well, even as he was now. He was going to grow more.

Yume, as she would admit herself, was not very good with a bow. It probably wasn't a dexterity issue so much as a focus one. If I was being kind, I'd say she was very relaxed; if I wasn't, I'd say she lacked seriousness.

How could I make her get serious? That was the task before me.

Shihoru's problem was her personality, but fixing her shy, withdrawn nature would be easier said than done. She was always conscious of the eyes of those around her, worrying about how people felt about her and whether she was inconveniencing them.

Well, turning that around, though, it meant she spent all that time looking at other people. As a mage, and therefore furthest from the enemy, she ought to be able to get a wide field of vision. I'd need to have her take advantage of that.

For Ranta, his free spirit was a double-edged blade. But the only option was to let him do as he pleased, while accounting for the fact that it would hurt us some of the time. If I limited him too much, his good points would disappear.

Soon enough, I'd be able to get a handle on how he worked. Then, if I included Ranta's actions into my calculations, I'd be able to use him well.

On our first day in the Old City of Damuro, we killed four goblins, and made 10 silver and 45 copper.

The second day, it was 1 silver.

The third day, as we proceeded with exploring the Old City and making a simple map, we killed goblins, and made 4 silver and 32 copper.

Having saved up a bit, we went to the market on that day. Everyone seemed to be enjoying themselves, and stayed excited even after we got back to the lodging house.

The lights were already out. Ranta was breathing softly in his sleep. Moguzo was snoring. What about Haruhiro?

I was a little sleepy myself.

We'd finally made it to the starting line. Everything was still to come. I was managing to enjoy it for now. Would it get even more fun? Was Renji having fun? He didn't look like it.

When I saw Ranta gleefully rifling through a dead goblin's belongings, I kind of envied him. I couldn't get that excited. I wasn't bereft of emotion, but crying, or getting giddy—I couldn't see myself doing either. I had a hunch that Renji was like that, too.

There was a wall. That was what it felt like. A single wall. Between me and reality.

Reality, huh?

Is this reality...?

"Manato," someone called out.

It was Haruhiro's voice. So he wasn't asleep, after all.

"Yeah?" I asked.

"Thank you."

"What's that for, all of a sudden?" I laughed despite myself. "I'm the one who ought to be grateful."

"Huh? You're grateful...? Why?"

"To everyone, for being my comrades."

What was I saying? Was this how I really felt? If it was bullshit, I was a natural swindler.

"I'm thankful for that," I went on. "I'm sure when I say it like this, it probably comes across as a lie, but I really do feel that way."

"No, I don't think you're lying, but..." Haruhiro paused. "How should I put this? We're always relying on you. If you hadn't been there for us, we'd have been in serious trouble. Depending how things had gone, we might not still

have been alive by this point.”

“That goes both ways. Without you and the others, there’s no telling what might have happened to me. We aren’t in a situation where you can survive on your own, you realize.”

No, I wasn’t lying. I was only telling the truth.

If I weren’t around, Haruhiro and the rest would have been in trouble. Well, yeah, that was probably true.

Nobody can live alone. But maybe I could have found a place where I could live.

Haruhiro and the rest couldn’t necessarily do that. Renji had called them scum, and he’d cut them loose.

To Renji, they lacked the capacity to survive, and weren’t worth using. For someone strong, or at least trying to be strong, like Renji, they were no more than scum.

What about me? In truth, how did I feel about Haruhiro and the rest?

“Now, I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, but...” The way Haruhiro spoke was tense, and full of hesitation. “I think you could have found any number of people willing to be your comrades. By asking someone to let you join their party, for instance.”

“A volunteer soldier party?” I asked.

It was a viable option. It probably would have been possible. Why hadn’t I done that?

A thought occurred to me.

When I’d entered the priest’s guild to become a priest, I had hardly been the best student. That said, I hadn’t been the worst student, either.

For me, if I could work out how to do something the first time I did it, repeating it over and over was agony, so I cut corners. My master in the guild was no idiot, so he’d realized that and reamed me for it.

Any time he got angry at me, I’d find another method, a more efficient way of

slacking off.

No matter how my master, Master Honen, got angry, no matter how he tried to persuade me, I'd just put on a thin smile, not doing anything to fix my attitude.

I was so stubborn, even I had to cock my head to the side and wonder what was up with me.

Become humble, Master Honen would lecture me. *If you do, you bear in you the buds of exceptional talent.*

The candid Master Honen kept trying to teach me with those frank words of his.

But he could threaten me, praise me, be as harsh or encouraging as he liked, and I did not change. I absorbed what I needed quickly, then let the rest go in one ear, out the other.

I can't have been a terribly likable student for Master Honen. I was blatantly rebellious.

What was more, strange as this may be to say, I didn't oppose him directly, which only made it worse.

"Honestly, the thought never really crossed my mind," I said. "You know, I'm probably not the type that can put up with having to bow his head to others. Hierarchical relationships, too. I doubt I'm any good at handling those. I don't remember what I was doing before I came here, though, so I don't know for sure."

"Ah... It might be the same for me," Haruhiro confessed.

"Somehow..." I murmured.

I felt glad I'd come to Grimgar. What exactly had happened before I came here?

What kind of person am I?

What kind of person was I?

"I feel like I'm not the sort of person that anyone should be treating as a

comrade,” I said.

“That’s not...” Haruhiro mumbled a bit, then continued. “As for what the past Manato was like, it doesn’t matter. No one cares. It’s the current Manato that’s our comrade. You’re our leader. We’d be in trouble without you here for us.”

“I need the rest of you, too,” I said.

Was that how I really felt? Or was I just playing along?

I smiled wryly. It was really inconvenient, you know. This not-knowing-myself business.

“Still, it’s so weird,” I said. “All of this. What are we even doing? Swords and sorcery. It’s like we’re in a game or something.”

“A game, huh? You’ve got that—” Haruhiro started to say, then stopped. “A game, what is that...?”

“Huh?” I was at a loss for an answer. “...I don’t know. But that’s what I said just now. ‘It’s like a game.’ It came to mind at the time.”

“Well, when you said it, I felt like you were right. But what sort of game? A game...”

Soon after that, Haruhiro drifted off to sleep.

I was wide awake, and I couldn’t get to sleep. Unable to stay put, I slipped out of the lodging house.

When I went to Sherry’s Tavern, Renji was drinking at the counter. It was pretty crowded, but no one was sitting in the seats on either side of him.

I sat down in a seat next to Renji.

“How goes it?” Renji asked me on his own.

“Not bad.”

“Where have you been going?”

“Damuro.”

“Goblins, huh?” Renji said. “It suits you people.”

“You’re in a good mood tonight.”

“I did in an orc.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“When I face small fry like goblins, it makes me feel like a bully. It’s depressing.”

“So if you’re going to fight, you’d prefer a strong opponent?” I asked.

Renji didn’t answer my question.

When I ordered a drink from one of the waitresses, Renji ordered another drink for himself, too.

Renji’s face hadn’t turned red from the alcohol, and his expression was no different from usual, but he was clearly in a good mood.

“Manato,” he said, “I could have let you join.”

“Your party?”

“Yeah. The thing is, though... we don’t need two leaders.”

“Agreed.”

“If you’re willing to do as I say, I can still use you now.”

“Surely you jest.”

“No. I’m not joking. Stop wasting your time with all that scum.”

“You’re in quite the rush to get places, aren’t you?” I said.

“If I really rushed, no one would be able to keep up. What about you?”

Ohh, I see.

I’d had it wrong. Renji wasn’t in a good mood at all. It was the opposite. Renji was irritated. Badly irritated, too.

I was pretty sure I knew the reason.

Orcs, along with the undead, were the strongest enemies of humanity. There was this general opinion that a volunteer soldier wasn’t fully fledged until they’d killed an orc. Team Renji had taken on an orc early, and won. But Renji wasn’t satisfied. Worse yet, he’d been made keenly aware of the difference between him and his comrades, and he’d lost hope.

I can do this easily, but are these guys only at this level? If I were to guess at how Renji felt, that would be it.

“Hey, Renji. Here’s what I think.” I put a hand on Renji’s shoulder. “No matter how fast someone is, they can’t run at full speed all the time. There are people who are slow, but they can keep moving forward without resting much. From my perspective, I can see your back far ahead of us, but it’s not going to be like that forever.”

“Lose the baggage.” Renji glared at me. “Then you’ll be able to run fast, too.”

“Instead of hurrying onward, I want to enjoy the scenery.” I smiled, rubbing Renji’s shoulder a bit, then letting go. “Either way, I can’t see myself running alongside you. I mean, come on, Renji. Your legs are too long.”

Renji glanced down at my legs, then scowled a bit. “You’re a real joker.”

4. Until I Close My Eyes

Instead of hurrying onward, I want to enjoy the scenery. Was that how I really felt? I didn’t know.

“...!”

Moguzo and I were pulling in three goblins when one of them slipped between us.

Were we in trouble? No.

Haruhiro, who was watching the goblins, immediately called out, “There’s one headed your way, Ranta!”

Ranta instantly replied, “Yeah!” and chased after the goblin that was going for Yume and Shihoru in the back line. “I already knew that!”

We were hunting goblins in the Old City of Damuro, day in and day out. Everyone had finally gotten used to it, and we were getting the hang of things. Ranta was the same as ever, though.

“Ha! Anger!” Ranta stepped into the attack completely, thrusting out with his longsword.

It was too far. He missed.

“Wha?! You’re no ordinary goblin, are you...?!”

“It’s clearly just a normal goblin, man!” Haruhiro called, with a glance over at me.

I gave him a slight nod as I parried a goblin’s blows with my short staff, and Haruhiro went to support Ranta.

Yume was next to Shihoru. If Ranta, Haruhiro, and Yume worked together, I was sure they could take down a single goblin.

“Fuh! Hah...!” Moguzo didn’t let the goblin’s nimble movements trick him. He was doing a good job of defending.

I could handle a single goblin by myself easily, too. Even if it was two or three, as long as I was just buying time, I could manage. But when it came to keeping an eye on the larger picture as I faced an enemy, that was pretty tough.

I was the priest, though, so I needed to provide treatment with light magic as soon as someone got hurt. On top of that, as the leader of the party, I needed to give the appropriate orders. I couldn’t just be focused on the enemy in front of me.

Should I tell Moguzo to swing wider with his bastard sword? I wondered.

Having learned the lesson from the beginning, in which he had swung relying on brute force, never hitting, and exhausting himself too much, Moguzo now used his sword in a rather compact way. That wasn’t bad, in and of itself, but at this rate, he was bound to make himself too small. He was a big guy, and a warrior too, so I wanted him to swing hard and intimidate the enemy, especially when there were several of them.

I’ll tell him later, I decided. The issue was how to say it, though. Moguzo was so delicate.

“Geez! What’re you two doin’?!” Yume called.

Yume must have gotten frustrated seeing Ranta and Haruhiro struggling to attack a goblin. She pulled her machete and sprang at it.

“Diagonal Cross!”

The goblin shrieked and fell back, trying to avoid it, but received a shallow cut from its shoulder to its chest.

Immediately afterwards, Haruhiro hit it with a Backstab. His timing was so good, you'd think they'd signaled each other to pull it off.

Haruhiro pulled out the dagger as he jumped back, and the goblin coughed blood and collapsed.

What was that? Did he hit a vital point? Was it coincidence? Or was he aiming to do it?

"Huh...?" From Haruhiro's look of surprise, it had to be coincidence. "Did I hit it in a good spot? Maybe? Or a bad spot...?"

"Whoa?! I've gotta finish it!" Ranta leapt on the goblin, decapitating it with his longsword. "Nice! I got my vice!"

"Yume thinks this after every battle, but dread knights sure are savage, huh."

"Don't say 'savage'! Use the more elegant term, 'atrocious'! We dread knights serve the Dark God, Lord Skullhell. We are atrocious and inhumane, cold and ruthless knights with neither blood nor tears!"

So easygoing. Both Ranta and Yume. I had to warn them about it, of course. But these two, in a different way from Moguzo, also required a careful choice in how I went about it.

If I just told them, it wasn't that they wouldn't work to improve themselves, so much as that it was possible their very natures would make it so they didn't.

Neither meant anything bad by it, but they were hard to handle. If you tried to handle them, it made things hard.

Rather than try to use them, I needed to let them bring out their personalities to their hearts' content, while I tried to turn them in a positive direction. That was the best way to think of it.

And speaking of hard to handle...

"Ohm, rel, ect..." Shihoru drew elemental sigils with her staff, beginning to chant a spell. "Vel, darsh...!"

It was Shadow Beat. A shadow elemental that looked like a mass of black seaweed flew out with a unique sound that went, *Vwong!*

Yeah. It was coming this way. But, of course, I wasn't the target.

It smacked into the goblin I was facing, right in the back of the head. That goblin let out a weird cry of, "Gagah!" and its entire body convulsed.

Shihoru had given me the perfect opening. I struck the goblin in the side of its face, kicking it to the ground. I could have struck the finishing blow, too, but I left that to Ranta.

"Take this! Hatred...! Dammit! You're just a stupid goblin! Take this! And this! And this...!"

I smiled at Shihoru.

She looked down, flustered, pulling down the brim of her hat to cover her face. She shook her head as if to say, *No, it was nothing. I didn't do anything.*

Well, darn.

Did Shihoru have potential as a mage? It was outside my area of expertise, so I couldn't say. But I figured she probably wasn't completely hopeless. Even in her current state, she was an asset, and she'd only get better.

There was even a way to improve Shihoru's power by leaps and bounds, if I chose to.

It wasn't impossible. I could probably pull it off. But I wasn't all that eager to.

It seemed Shihoru might have a thing for me. More like, well, I was almost certain she did. I mean, look at the way she acted. It was so obvious, you could call it blatant.

If she weren't a comrade in the party, it'd be no big deal. I could ignore her, or go out with her if I felt like it.

I didn't know my past, but I had the feeling I wasn't the type to make a big fuss over crushes and all that. Romance was just a way of playing around. It might help kill time, but getting serious about it just seemed ridiculous.

For instance, I could get Shihoru's attention, and inspire her. Heck, if I were to

pretend to be her boyfriend, I was sure I could make her do anything.

But Shihoru was my comrade. I didn't want to deceive her, or hurt her. Even more than that, I couldn't do anything to harm the bonds of trust and human relationships in the party.

That said, if I rejected her, even subtly, Shihoru would get depressed. That would be troublesome in its own way, too.

"Thanks...!" While I was mulling over things, Moguzo ended the fight with a Rage Blow. Because he shouted, "Thanks!" whenever he used it, we also called it the Thanks Slash. Moguzo's sword entered through the goblin's shoulder and made it halfway through its chest.

What power!

With a grunt, he swung his sword, and the goblin was sent sailing away, like it was almost a joke.

"Yahoo!" Ranta rushed over to the near-dead goblin, whaling on it with his longsword. "Gwahaha! That's three vices in a row! That makes eleven vices total! My demon's powered up! Whenever it feels like it, it'll whisper in the enemy's ear to distract it! That's awesome!"

"Whenever it feels like it...?" Haruhiro said with a sigh. "Your demon sure is useless, huh."

"Hey! I won't let that pass, Haruhiro! Don't you go dissing Zodiac-kun, or I'll curse you!"

"I mean, you can only call it out at night—"

Haruhiro gave Ranta too much attention. If you just ignored whatever Ranta said, he'd eventually get lonely and give in, so it was best to leave him alone.

Haruhiro was probably doing it because he was a nice guy, unlike me. I didn't mind that, though. About Haruhiro.

We'd left Alterna at seven o'clock in the morning, and arrived at the Old City of Damuro around eight. It had to be after noon now. We decided to take a break, and have lunch while we were at it.

"Oh, gotta pray." Yume shaved off a thin slice of the dried meat with her

knife, leaving it on the ground as she put her hands together and closed her eyes. “White God Elhit-chan, thank you for everythin’. Yume’ll share some of her food with you, so keep lookin’ out for her, okay?”

“So, about what you’re doing there,” Haruhiro said, tearing off a piece of bread. “That’s a ritual that’s laid out in the rules of the hunters’ guild, isn’t it? You have to offer a little of your food to your god, right?”

“Sure do. The White God Elhit-chan is this reeeeeeally big wolf, y’see. And there’s this reeeeeeally big Black God called Rigel who’s a wolf, too. Elhit and Rigel are on super-bad terms with each other. Because Elhit-chan watches over us hunters, we can get through our daily huntin’ without any accidents.”

“So, basically, it’s an act of worship. Hunters worship the White God Elhit. But you’re calling your god Elhit-chan and offering to share some of your food. Is that okay?”

“Nah, it’s fine,” Yume made a funny face. “Elhit-chan is forgiving, so Yume doesn’t think Elhit-chan’d get mad at her over something like that, y’know. Actually, Elhit-chan’s never gotten mad at Yume.”

“...Your feelings,” Shihoru said, while carefully holding something that looked like a doughnut. “I think your feelings are what gets through to your god. Though, that’s just what I think...”

I brought my lips to my leather waterskin, taking a sip of water. What a good girl. But nothing good was likely to come of her falling for a guy like me.

“Yeah,” I answered. “The words you say are important, but the feeling you put into saying them is even more important. The prayers we priests use in our light magic won’t work if we say the words wrong, but I don’t think your prayers to Elhit are the same.”

“Yume puts a lot, a looooot, of feelin’ into it.” Yume spread her arms wide in an exaggerated way. “Yume goes to sleep at night, yeah? Well, when she does, Elhit-chan shows up in her dreams pretty often. Yume asked, ‘Can I ride on your back, Elhit-chan?’ and when she did, Elhit-chan said, ‘Sure,’ y’see. Yume went for a ride on Elhit-chan and we ran around like *whoosh*. Elhit-chan is crazy-fast. Yume said, ‘This is amazing.’”

“...This story,” Ranta chewed his dried meat loudly while putting on a sour face. “It’s got an actual point at the end, right? I’ve held my tongue and listened for a long time, so if you don’t have a good point, I’m gonna snap. Like, seriously.”

“A point?” Yume blinked. “No. There isn’t one.”

“Trip!” Ranta shouted and did a face fault. “Are you stupid?! Don’t tell long stories with no point! What’ll you do if I drown to death, unable to escape from the spiral of broken expectations?!”

“Go ahead...” Shihoru said in disgust. “I wish you’d drown to death...”

“Ah!” Ranta immediately pointed at Shihoru. “Ah! Ahhhh! I heard that! I heard you, Shihoru! Just now, you just told me to go die, didn’t you, huh?!”

“...I only said that I wished you’d drown.”

“You’re even making requests about the cause of death! You’re horrible! That’s the lowest thing you can do as a person! You’re the most rotten, horrible girl in all of history, that’s what you are!”

It had started again. The usual banter.

If I was being honest, I couldn’t bring myself to like this boisterous atmosphere. It wasn’t unpleasant, but I felt like I was out of place in it, and it felt awkward to be here.

Still, I didn’t get sullen or just watch with cold eyes. I tried to involve myself somehow. Was it because it was awkward? Was it because I was being forced to go along with it? It was true, I was trying to go along with it. I couldn’t say I wasn’t straining myself at all.

But, assuming I had some innate personality I didn’t show around others, did I really have to reveal it to anyone? Was it wrong to hide it?

Setting Ranta aside for the moment, Haruhiro, Yume, Shihoru, and Moguzo were probably kinder than most people out there. They were good folks. Even Ranta, as much of a selfish, rowdy guy as he was, wasn’t evil.

If I was being harsh, my comrades were naive. I couldn’t imagine us staying like this. Everyone was going to have to change. Whether they liked it or not, it

had to happen.

But it was nice, right?

In little moments like these, the way we could relax and joke around together was nice. It was good to have this kind of thing. No matter what happened, I didn't think we should lose this.

The time we were spending now was probably more precious than any of us thought.

Like I'd thought, I really couldn't work with a guy like Renji. Maybe the two of us were similar in some way, but what we wanted, what we were aiming for, was different.

I was starting to become more certain. This was right. I hadn't made a mistake.

"We've become a good party," I said quietly to myself, despite not meaning to.

Haruhiro looked at me, blinking. "Huh?"

"We can take on up to three goblins at a time now," I said with a smile. No one who saw it would have been able to tell the difference, but this wasn't my usual artificial smile. "No one even got hurt, so I think it's safe to assume we could handle more. Yume's much better with a machete than she is with a bow. She has a lot of strength. If we think about our methods some more, we might be able to handle four."

"Oh, about that..." Haruhiro took on a thoughtful expression.

Yeah. Haruhiro was actually thinking like he should. He was a man who could think, and make decisions.

"Yeah, four sounds doable," he agreed.

"I knew we'd be able to rely on Moguzo," I said. "After all, he's got such a big body. Just by being there, he intimidates the enemy. And with his precise swordsmanship, he can get what needs doing done."

"Ah, I've been thinking that, too," Haruhiro said. "Moguzo's talented."

“...R-Really? You think?” Moguzo looked down, bashfully. “I don’t know why, b-but, I like doing detailed work.”

“It doesn’t suit you!” Ranta yelled angrily.

“Y-Yeah, I think so, too...”

“Hey, it’s a good thing,” Haruhiro said, glaring at Ranta. “Moguzo isn’t sloppy, unlike a certain someone.”

“Oh? What, you saying that to me? Me, the guy they call the Gale-speed Machine of Precision?”

“Nobody’s ever called you that, Ranta.” Yume’s eyes were cold.

If they ganged up on him that bad, even Ranta would get dispirited.

“Ranta’s amazing, too.” I chose my words carefully, so that it wouldn’t be obviously empty praise. “Especially the way he’s always ready to attack. He’s not afraid of failure, so I think he’s improved at using his skills faster than any of us. The rest of us, myself included, are more cautious, you could say. Without Ranta around, we might not be willing to take that next step forward.”

“Yeah, I guess?” Ranta was obviously happy. You could see it in the way his nostrils flared. “Well, you know what they call me. The Whirlwind Machine of Forward Momentum, yeah?”

“What happened to the Gale-speed Machine of Precision?” Haruhiro shot back with exasperation.

“As for Shihoru...” For a second, I hesitated.

What should I do? What was it I ought to do here? For now, I couldn’t see what the best answer was.

But there was no need to rush, right? I wasn’t trying to race to the top like Renji. I could shelve this one for now. Someday, I might find a good way to handle it.

“...Shihoru is always aware of her surroundings. Darsh Magic has a lot of spells that can confuse or bind the target, if I recall. That lets her help us when needed. You wanted to learn Darsh Magic so you could help us, didn’t you, Shihoru?”

Shihoru stared blankly for a second, her mouth hanging open as she listened to me, but then nodded without a word. Hanging her head, she tugged her hat down to cover her face.

I did think she was cute. But there was a pretty wide gap between my feelings and the feelings Shihoru actually wanted me to have for her.

Even so, no one could say that the gap would never be filled. I didn't know the future.

I looked at Yume. "I think Yume may well be the bravest of us all. She isn't afraid of anything. As the healer, I wish she'd be more careful, but I'm also glad that Yume will be there to help if anything happens."

"Yume is?" Yume's face melted into a grin. I was sure that was an expression only Yume could make. "You sure? Is Yume really that brave? Yume doesn't think she's ever been told that before. Though, maybe she doesn't think many things are scary. Yume hopes you'll give her a pass for being a hunter who can't use a bow."

"Everyone has weaknesses and things they can't do," I said. "When you're alone, those failings can be fatal, but we're a party. We can make up for each other's shortcomings."

"Oh, yeah." Yume beamed. "That's right. Yume may cause trouble for all of you goin' forward, but she'll do her breasttest."

Ranta snorted derisively. "You mean 'bestest,' like 'best,' not 'breasttest.' Breasttest sounds like, you know, you'd need some special kind of breasts."

"Breasttest..." Yume touched her chest with both hands. "Yume wonders what kinda breasts are the breasttest breasts. How distantly related are they to Yume's tiny breasts?"

"...Maybe they're in the same family?" Haruhiro asked.

Yume's expression was totally serious. "Do you think they're in the same family, Haru-kun?"

"I-I dunno. I wonder."

"Yume wonders, too. The breasttest breasts. It does sound a little cute, you

know.”

“The br—” Moguzo started to say, and everyone looked at him. He started to sweat profusely, waving his hands and shaking his head. “I-I-I-I-It was nothing. R-R-Really, nothing.”

“...Now I’m curious.” With Shihoru staring at him, Moguzo cast his eyes downward.

In the end, he sounded like he was going to cry as he said, “S-Sorry,” so no one pushed him about it any further.

Some time later, I realized I hadn’t said anything to Haruhiro. Well, it could wait. I wanted to talk with Haruhiro one-on-one. If we did that, we could talk more deeply.

Haruhiro, as a thief, was playing a middle role between the front line and the back line. He had to look at the whole picture, responding to the situation in various ways. He was our scout, too, so he had the second-highest flexibility within the party after me. In a way, he was our second commander. Haruhiro had slotted into that position quite well.

I couldn’t do everything myself, so someone was going to have to fill in for me on some things. As for who that would be, for the moment, Haruhiro was the only choice.

Well, that was just what I wanted to have happen in time. It’d be bad to put pressure on him in a weird way, so there was no need to hurry.

We were still laying the groundwork. Once a solid foundation was laid, we’d build on top of it. I couldn’t let the shadow of Renji, who was going on ahead of us, confuse me.

In the afternoon, Haruhiro was, unusually, a little excited when he came back from scouting.

“It’s crazy,” he said. “There are only two, but one of them’s huge. It might be as big as I am.”

“A hobgoblin.” My eyes widened a little. “They’re a subrace of goblins, with a larger build than the ordinary ones. They’re stupid brutes that the goblins use

like slaves, so maybe that's what that one is."

"Oh, yeah?" Ranta licked his lips. "If it's got a slave, that could be a high-ranking gob, don't you think? If it is, it's gotta have some good loot, for sure."

Haruhiro stroked his chin. "...It did have plated metal armor on. The hobgoblin was wearing chain mail, too. That, and a helmet. It might have been large enough for one of us humans to wear."

"Ooh..." Moguzo groaned.

"Two of them, huh." I lowered my eyes as I thought about it.

A goblin in plated metal armor, and a hobgoblin in chain mail. I couldn't say anything for sure until I saw them myself, but it felt doable.

"Hmm." Yume looked up diagonally. "Yume thinks we can handle two of them, though."

"If I..." Shihoru grasped her staff tight. "...was to target one first, and manage to hit it with a spell, it would be easier to handle things after that... I think."

"Yume'll try whooshing some arrows at it, too. Even if she misses, the gobbies'll get scared, so then you can go right at 'em."

I looked around to each of my comrades. It looked like everyone was raring to go. Except Haruhiro.

Haruhiro had looked excited, too, when he'd come back from scouting, but now he was taking a step back.

This was it. This was the part of Haruhiro I held in high regard. Perhaps I sympathized with him. In time, Haruhiro and I would be able to talk with each other frankly. I had that sort of feeling.

When Haruhiro said, "Guess we're doing this," that settled it for me.

I nodded. "Okay, let's do it."

Once we had a plan, we got into a circle, and everyone put their hands in.

We couldn't shout out loud in the middle of enemy territory, so when I said "*Fighto*," in a quiet voice, everyone raised their hands and gave a restrained response.

“Ippatsu!”

With that little ritual of ours finished, Haruhiro cocked his head to the side.

“...What is fighto ippatsu, I wonder?”

“...I dunno.” Shihoru tilted her head to the side, puzzled. *“But doing it gives me this vague feeling of nostalgia.”*

“Yume gets that feelin’, too. But she doesn’t know what it is. Weird, huh.”

Ever since we started coming to Damuro, we had taken to forming a circle before taking on a slightly tough looking enemy. It was weird to just stay quiet, so I just sort of said, *“Fighto.”* When I did, my comrades replied, *“Ippatsu!”*

Ever since the first time, that had become our practice. It felt like I knew it from somewhere, but it wasn’t clear where. Something about it felt off to me.

That happened a lot.

Would we ever be able to remember?

Haruhiro brought Yume and Shihoru with him, and they approached the two-story building where the goblin and hobgoblin were.

Moguzo, Ranta, and I were following them, too, about six or seven meters behind.

First, we’d close in as much as possible without getting noticed. Up to there, huh?

Haruhiro and the others hid behind a wall about fifteen meters from the two-story building. We were positioned about three meters to their rear.

There it was. On the second floor, which was almost like a balcony after having nearly completely collapsed, there was a goblin wearing plated armor.

The armored gob.

The hobgoblin was sitting on the first floor.

The armored gob and the hobgob. There really were just two of them.

Shihoru brought a hand to her chest, taking a deep breath. Yume nocked an arrow.

The armored gob and the hobgob, they hadn't noticed us yet.

Shihoru and Yume stuck just their upper bodies out from behind the wall.

Shihoru began chanting a spell. "Ohm, rel, ect, vel, darsh...!"

Vwong. It was Shadow Beat.

At almost the exact moment the shadow elemental launched from the tip of Shihoru's staff, Yume loosed her arrow. The arrow she fired at the armored gob went completely astray, but the shadow elemental hit the hobgob in the arm.

While the hobgob sputtered and convulsed, the armored gob looked our way.

Haruhiro shouted, "We've been spotted!"

"We're going in!" I gave the order, immediately springing out.

The hobgob put on the helmet that had been at its feet, rising and picking up its spiked club, but it was unsteady. The armored gob picked up something, too. That was—a crossbow, huh? We'd never encountered a goblin with one of those before.

I tried to call out a warning. I didn't make it in time. The armored gob quickly took aim and pulled the trigger.

It was fast. The bolt flew much faster than an arrow from a normal bow.

"Augh...!" Haruhiro got hit by the bolt, and crouched down.

Shihoru let out a little scream, while Yume put an arm around Haruhiro's back.

"Haru-kun...?!" Yume cried.

Haruhiro was gasping. He looked like he was in a lot of pain. Not good.

"Haruhiro!" I rushed over to him, tearing out the bolt with one pull. He was bleeding badly.

Hurry, hurry, hurry. But don't panic, I told myself.

I made the sign of the hexagram, forming an image of light in my mind, and focused that light into every nerve as I chanted a prayer.

"O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you... Cure."

The light unleashed from my palms sealed his wounds.

Faster. Faster. No, calm down. Rushing things won't increase the speed he heals at. It's almost done. Just a little more—

“M-Manato...!” Ranta shouted. “Hurry up! W-We can't keep this up...!”

“You're fine now, right?!” I took off running before Haruhiro could nod.

Moguzo traded blows with the hobgob, while Ranta and Yume did the same with the armored gob.

Compared to Moguzo, Ranta looked like he was in more trouble. I'd need Moguzo to do his best with the hobgob, and have Shihoru and Haruhiro support him. Looking at them, they were already doing so without orders.

For now, I needed to switch with Ranta, and—I tried to do it, but the armored gob must have seen it coming. It closed the gap between it and Ranta, while feinting violently to the left and right.

Ranta was forced onto the defensive. I wasn't going to be able to get between them like that.

As for Yume, she was running around in confusion.

“O-Oh, crap! Crap! Damn it! Screw you...!” Ranta got pushed back and back, and, probably as a last-ditch effort, he jumped backwards to get away from the armored gob.

It was unexpected to me, but the armored gob managed to follow Ranta just fine. It pushed in, then took a single swipe with its sword.

Fresh blood splattered.

His neck.

The armored gob's sword had cut Ranta's neck open.

It looked like it had taken out a vein.

“Yume! Do something...!” I shouted, forcefully striking the armored gob. Once I forced it to back off, I'd have to let Yume handle it. Ranta had sunk weakly to the ground.

I need to treat him. No, but maybe I can't.

“Mrrow! Fwah...!” Yume was already on the ropes.

While I checked Ranta’s wounds, I shouted, “Haruhiro, get over here! Ranta’s down...!”

“What?! H-His neck...?!” Haruhiro must have been surprised by how sudden it was, but he responded, which really helped. “Hey, gob, over here!”

“It hurts...” Ranta groaned. “M-Manato, I, I, I...”

“You’re going to be fine, Ranta! I’ll fix you up in no time!” I took a breath, then made the sign of the hexagram. “O Light, may Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon you... Cure!”

“Nngh... Fuhhh, ahhh, kuh... Ngh, damn it! Ah...! Okay...!”

“Brush Clearer...!” Yume was attacking the armored gob. No, that noise. Did it deflect her attack?

“Not happening...!” It looked like Haruhiro had stepped in to help, though. “Yowch...!”

“Ranta!” I slapped Ranta on the back.

“Yeah!” Ranta psyched himself up, charging at the armored gob. “Anger...!”

The armored gob crouched to get out of the way of Ranta’s Anger. It counterattacked immediately.

Now that he was forced on the defensive, Ranta’s moves were clearly sluggish. Even if the wound had closed, he hadn’t gotten the blood that was shed back, so he had to be struggling.

“Dammit! This is bull! You’re just a goddamn gob...!” Ranta screamed.

Still, I needed him to hang in there.

“Haruhiro!” I ran over to him.

Haruhiro had a deep slash in his right arm. That meant he couldn’t use his dominant hand. If I didn’t heal it, he couldn’t fight.

“O Light, may Lumiaris’s divine protection be upon you... Cure.”

What was this feeling of exhaustion? It felt like the life was being sucked out

of me. But I couldn't let it mess me up.

Focus. I have to focus. It's all in my head. I'm not exhausted at all.

"...Okay," I touched Haruhiro's right arm. It had healed properly. It was fine.

Moguzo was keeping the hobgob busy, and despite the agony he was in, Ranta was just barely hanging in there. Shihoru must have overused her magic. She looked exhausted.

But I was still good to go, too.

We could still do this. I was managing to look at the whole picture. Honestly, I could see it all too well. It looked like Yume had a cut on her upper arm.

"Yume, get over here! I'll cure you!" I called.

"Yume is fine! She can keep fightin'!"

"Just get over here! Haruhiro, trade places with Yume!"

"...On it!" Haruhiro left, and Yume came to take his place.

You look uneasy, Yume. It's okay. We're gonna be okay.

I smiled at Yume, and set to work curing her.

"O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you... Cure...!"

Have I overused my magic? The thought briefly crossed my mind. *No, that's not true. I'll heal her. I have to focus, and heal her wounds. It's fine. Look. I'm done.*

—I felt dizzy.

I'm imagining it.

I shook my head, then spoke to Yume. "Let's go!"

I see it. I'm seeing it. Moguzo. He's having a rough time alone. I bet he can't finish it. Ranta and Haruhiro, too. They're having a hard time beating the armored gob.

"Haruhiro, go help Moguzo!" I called.

Haruhiro nodded.

Yeah. That was good. For the armored gob, I'd stand in front, and have Ranta and Yume attack.

I had to do it. With a short staff?

Damn. Screw this thing. If only I had a sword.

Priests weren't allowed to use bladed weapons in combat. What a nuisance. But I was going to do this.

"Nghhhhhh!" the hobgoblin roared.

"Oof!" cried Moguzo.

"Ngh! Ngh! Ngh!"

What? What happened? It was the hobgob. The hobgob was whaling on Moguzo.

"Ngh! Ngh! Ngh! Ngh! Nghhhh...!!"

"Ungh...!" Moguzo was finally forced to take a knee. He was bleeding from the head.

That was when Haruhiro clung onto the hobgob's back. It flailed about, trying to throw him off, but Haruhiro held on.

"Whoa! Ohh! Whoaaaaaaa...?!"

"You're doing fine, Haruhiro! Keep buying time like that...!" I called.

I headed for Moguzo.

Yeah. I have to treat him. With light magic. Moguzo. He's bleeding bad. He got clobbered by that spiked club.

Moguzo apologized, saying, "I'm sorry," or something.

What are you saying? I'm the priest.

"O Light, may Lumiaris's divine protection be upon you... Cure."

It's kind of slow, isn't it? The rate of healing. The light's weak. Focus. I've gotta focus. I've gotta focus more, and—

As I tried to, I looked, or I saw, rather.

Haruhiro took an elbow to the gut from the hobgob, sweeping him away.

“Ah...!”

That wasn't all. The hobgob kicked Haruhiro. Kicked him and sent him rolling.

I heard it. Haruhiro crying for help. Even before that, I was already moving.

Moguzo, sorry. Your wounds aren't even fully closed yet. But this takes priority.

“Smash...!” I screamed.

Here I was, shouting my skill names, almost like I was Ranta. I swung my short staff, smacking the hobgob in the back of the head.

The hobgob was wearing a helmet. It still seemed to affect it somewhat, though.

Making use of centrifugal force, I hit it with the part of my staff closest to my hands. Maybe it helped. But this wasn't over yet.

“Ngh! Hah! Yah!” I never stopped, constantly spinning my short staff around. I struck, and struck, and struck. I beat on it like crazy.

“Haruhiro, get up!” I called.

Finally, I knew what we ought to do. Why had I never figured it out before? Because the blood had rushed to my head? I was under too much pressure, and didn't have the composure to think? I could make excuses later. For now, I just had to do what needed to be done.

“Run!” I yelled. “Everyone, run away...!”

Haruhiro jumped up, started running, and came to a sudden stop. “M-Manato, what about you...?!”

“I'm coming, too! Obviously! Now, hurry up and go!”

I continued attacking the hobgob as I slowly backed away.

An opening. I couldn't rush; I had to look for an opening.

“Thanks!” Moguzo unleashed a Rage Blow at the armored gob. While it didn't hit, it did make it back off.

Nice. Well done, Moguzo.

Using the opening that created, Moguzo did an about-face, and Ranta and Yume followed. Shihoru was pumping her legs diligently, too.

With a battle cry, the armored gob slashed Moguzo in the back, but it was a shallow hit that couldn't break through his chain mail.

Haruhiro was running with his face still turned backwards. "Manato, that's enough! Everyone's gotten away!"

"I know!"

What I knew was it wouldn't be that easy.

I jumped back, luring the hobgob in. The hobgob fell right for it. When he moved forward, I thrust twice.

The hobgob groaned, and his head was knocked back.

Now.

I turned around. The armored gob swung at me. I anticipated that, so I easily avoided it.

Now, run. Run. Run away. And don't look back.

"Urgh!"

Something slammed into my back.

I nearly tripped over my own feet, but I didn't turn back.

Haruhiro let out what sounded like a scream. "Manato...?!"

"I'm fine!"

Whatever the case, we have to get away from here first. That's the priority. Right? Yeah, it is. I know that. I know. We have to run. Run. Run away.

I had to look back, and check.

Are the armored gob and hobgob chasing us? I wonder. Can we stop now? Do we have to keep running? I should just look. If I look, I'll know. But I have to move forward. I'll move forward. Move. I have to go as far as I can.

Still, though, everyone's pretty fast.

Where is this? How far have we come?

*I don't really know. That's weird. It's weird. What happened? I. Ahh—
Hold on.*

I pitched forward, falling to the ground.

I've got to get up. Not good. Yeah. I'll get up. I don't have the strength. In my body. Why?

"...O-Ow..."

It hurts. What hurts? My back. Oh. There's something in my back.

I struggled to roll onto my side.

What's going on? This is bad, isn't it? Is it bad? I dunno.

"...I think... W-We're fine... now..."

"Manato...!" Haruhiro was here. Right next to me. Kneeling. "Manato, y-your wound, m-magic! That's right, use magic to cure it..."

"...Oh, yeah." I tried to make the sign of the hexagram. Huh? My hand. It's no good. My strength. Focus. How? I can't, not like this.

"...I-I c-can't... do it... I-I can't... use magic...!"

"D-Don't talk!" I heard Ranta's voice. "D-Don't you talk! Just make yourself comfortable, comfortable... Wait, how are you supposed to do that?!"

Shihoru approached. Shihoru reached out for my back. She touched... something. It hurt, or rather, it felt—heavy. Oppressively heavy.

But the weight didn't stop there; it seemed to continue through me. I had a bad feeling about this.

Repeatedly, I blinked.

Moguzo's here. He's so big. Moguzo. Well, of course. He's not going to suddenly get smaller.

"Wh-Wh-Wh..." Yume was so shaken, I felt sorry for her. "Wh-Wh-Wh..." Yume messed up her hair.

"What...?" Haruhiro crouched down, bringing his face close to me. "Y-You're

gonna be okay, all right, Manato? You're gonna be okay, all right? Just, just hang in there. Hang in there, Manato, all right?"

Finally, the seriousness of the situation began to dawn on me.

I'm not gonna be okay. I see. That's how it is. It's no good.

—You're kidding me, right? Cut it out! No! It wasn't supposed to be like this! I have more to do! Not yet!

Yeah. Tomorrow, I'll do more. I thought there'd be more tomorrows. I took it as a given. A given that there was a future. For me, for us, there had to be. I never doubted. What is this? There's supposed to be more, so this, it's not fair. I have so much I want to do. Where did I go wrong? What wasn't good? Was I reckless? I thought we could handle it. They were strong. Who knew they'd be so strong? Was I weak? Or was I rushing things, despite being convinced I wasn't?

I want a do-over. Make it so this never happened. Please. Let me do it over. I'm begging you. I won't do it again. I won't mess up again. Me, and everyone will...

"In the end, you don't trust anyone, do you?" Ryoui said to me.

I smiled, like I always did. "Yeah, what of it?"

"How can you smile like that?! At a time like this?!" Mitsuka was crying.

I was smiling. "How, you ask? Because I'm fine, aren't I?"

"Don't think you'll get special treatment just 'cause you're a kid," xxx said threateningly as she throttled me.

Special? I had never thought that at all.

"I never should have given birth to you," xxx said with a hollow look on her face.

Ryoui? Mitsuka? xxx? xxx...? Who...?

I don't get it, but, ohhhh... I see. I wanted to be with someone.

I just wanted to walk with someone. Not alone; with someone else.

I wanted to walk together with everyone.

I wanted more connections.

To spend time on them, little by little, at a relaxed pace. It was the only way. Because I couldn't close the gap quickly.

If I did it this way, I thought I could. For sure. I thought I could have a do-over.

It's no good anymore. It's over. I can't believe this.

It's going to end here, like this, so easily. If this were a lie, a dream, how wonderful that would be.

But I'm sure it's not. This is reality.

It'll be over soon.

"Haru...hiro," I whispered.

"Wh-What? What is it? Manato, what is it?"

I'm sorry. Haruhiro. Sorry. There was more I wanted to tell you. Things that I wanted to say, things I wanted to talk about, so many of them. I was sure you and I could become friends. I think, someday, I could have told you, all of it, properly.

"Huh? What? S-Sorry? Why? For what?" he asked.

Damn. Oh, why? Why can't I speak? My voice, it won't form proper words. I... Right, that's right, Haruhiro, I'm counting on you. This is bad. I have to hurry. I don't have much time. You're the only one I can count on.

I must have rasped out some of that, because Haruhiro responded. "Counting on me? On me? For what? What do you want from me? Wait, no, Manato, no."

Take care of everyone. You're the only one. The only one who can. I can't do it. Can't do anything. I can't see anymore. I can't see.

Dark. It's gotten dark.

Damn.

Hey, everyone, are you there? If you're there, say something.

I can barely even see.

“We’re here! Everyone’s here! Manato! We’re here! Don’t go!”

Yeah, see, I don’t want to go, either.

I don’t want to go.

I want to stay here.

Here, with everyone.

But I have to go.

Ohh.

I.

I’m going to die.

“Don’t go! Manato! You can’t leave us! Don’t go! Please, Manato...!”

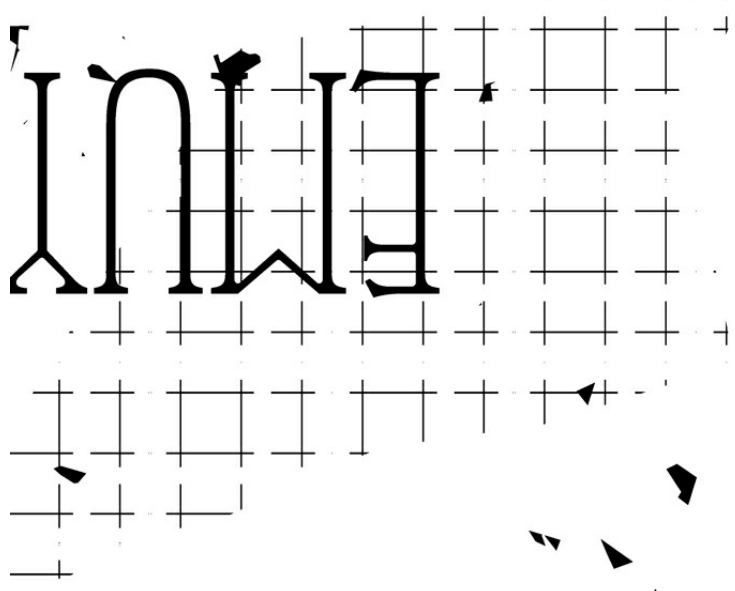
Keep calling me, like that.

Please.

Just like that.

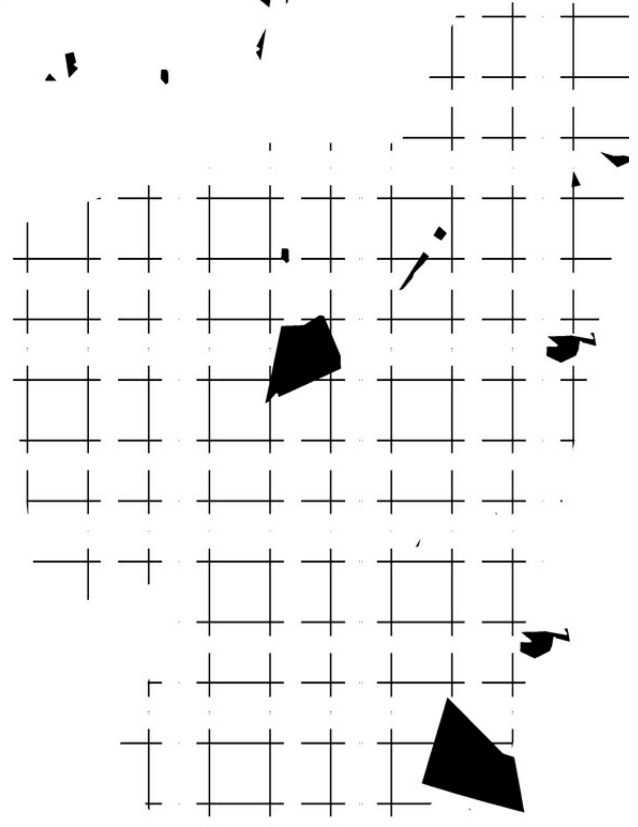
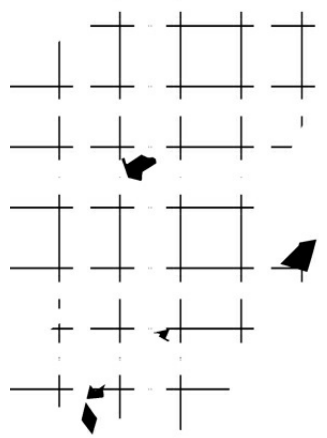
Until I can’t tell anymore.

Just a little longer—



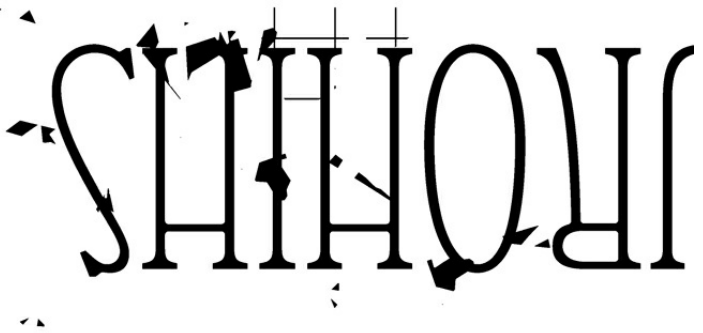
ex.3

Let's Rest For Today



Grimgar of
Fantasy and Ash

Level. Fourteen Plus



1. Not There

“Unngh? It’s gotta be here, right? The hunters’ guild...” Yume crossed her arms and frowned.

“...P-Probably.”

Beside her, Shihoru was fidgeting. She always was. Maybe Shihoru liked fidgeting.

“Yep,” Manato said. “This should be the place.”

Manato had brought them here, and he said it was, so that was that.

They were in Alterna, the northern part of it, in a corner of the North District. Close to the gate in the north, the North Gate, there was a building surrounded by a wooden fence.

“Okay, Yume’s gonna get goin’, then,” Yume announced.

“...T-Take care,” Shihoru stuttered.

“Do your best,” Manato smiled.

Thinking, *Manato’s smile, it’s such a smile! Shihoru’s voice, it’s so tiny!* Yume tried to climb over the fence.

“Y-Yume!” Manato stopped her.

“Nuh? What’s wrong?”

“No, there’s nothing wrong, but you don’t have to climb the fence. It looks like there’s an entrance over there.”

Looking over in the direction Manato was pointing, he was right—a part of the fence was a gate, and it was open. If she went through there, she could get in.

“Wah!” Yume cried. “Yume, she didn’t realize at all. Climbin’ is tough, so that’s good. Thanks, Manato.”

“Do your best,” he said after a pause.

“Yeah. Yume, she’s gonna do her best! Shihoru, Manato, you do your best,

too! But, y’know, what’s Yume supposed to do her best at, huh?”

“Th-That’s...” Why did Shihoru look ready to cry? “We won’t know until we go...”

“Guess not, huh. Shihoru, you feelin’ lonely?”

“...Huh? Wh-Why...?”

“Aren’t you cryin’ a little?”

“I-I’m not... crying... I-I’m fine.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, that’s good, then. So long! See you later!”

Yume went inside through the gate. There was a big yard on the other side of the fence, and a number of pens. The pens had dogs in them, and when Yume looked at them, they started barking.

“Oh!” she exclaimed. “That was a surprise! There’s no need for barkin’ like that. Yume, she’s not here to do anythin’ bad.”

Once she said that, some of the dogs stopped barking, but some of the others wouldn’t stop. It was a bit scary, but she approached and clicked her tongue at them.

“There, there. It’s all okay. Ahhh. If only Yume had some food on her. She didn’t bring any. Sorry about that...”

“Hey,” came a voice from above her.

When she looked up, there was a man sticking his head out the window, and the bottom half of his face was all beard.

“You there, what are you doing?” he demanded.

“Hoh?”

“No, not ‘hoh’! Tell me who you are, you!”

“Yume’s Yume, right?”

“Oh, I see. So you’re Yume, are you? For now, get your hand out of there. The dogs bite.”

“Meow? They’re lickin’, not bitin’. See? You wouldn’t bite, would you, little

pup?”

“...Well, those are no ordinary dogs,” the man said. “They’re wolf dogs, made by crossbreeding wolves and dogs. They’re more fierce than a dog, but more obedient than a wolf. Not that it matters, I guess.”

“Wolf dogs? Whooooooooooooo!”

“Wh-What? What is it?”

“They’re cute,” Yume said happily. “Wolf dogs. Yume, she wants to make friends with a wolf dog.”

“No... I’ve been asking, what are you? Please don’t tell me you intend to join us.”

“Us? You mean join you, old man?”

“O-Old man...? Well, I am an old man, but... sure, in the eyes of a young girl like you, I wouldn’t be anything but an old man, but...”

“Dad, then? That seems wrong.”

“I’m not your pops,” the man snapped. “This is the first time we’ve met. Do I really have to say this? It should be beyond obvious that I’m not your dad.”

“Oh, it’s obvious? Hm...”

“Wait, don’t get so depressed!” He looked alarmed.

“Okay! Yume’s not gonna get depressed! She’s gonna do her best!”

“R-Right. Good luck... What are you going to do your best at, anyway?”

“Nuh?” Yume nibbled on her index finger, cocking her head to the side.

“Yume, is it okay if she does her best? You know, she’s not really sure about that yet. She did just get here, after all. Ah!”

“Wh-What is it this time?”

“That’s right! Yume just got here! You know, *here*?”

“Ohh. You’re one of them, huh? A volunteer soldier trainee, right?”

“Vole and deer soldier trained bee...?” Yume nodded, clapping her hands.

“That’s it!”

“You just said... something completely different. Anyway, you’re a volunteer soldier trainee, and you’ve come because you want to join the hunters’ guild, right?”

“Yeah. Yeah. That’s it.”

“Well, then stop playing with the dogs and get inside already... Hey. Hey. Hey! Wait, what are you doing?!”

“Fwuh? What? Yume’s goin’ inside the pen, isn’t she?”

“Not the pen! No, the building! Get inside the guild buildeen—”

“Buildeen?” Yume repeated.

“I tripped over my tongue, that’s all! Ugh, that’s enough of this. I’ll come get you, so stay put!”

“Got it! Yume’ll stay here waitin’ for the old man to come get her!”

“...Stop it with the old man stuff.”

“Well, what should she call you, then?”

“It’s Itsukushima.” The man sighed, then slowly enunciated, “It’s I-tsu-ku-shi-ma. Don’t get it wrong... because I have the feeling you’re bound to.”

“Itsitsukushima?”

“Only one ‘its’!”

“Itsukushima!”

“Right. Now, listen. Until I get down there, don’t you take a single step. Got it?”

“Yes, sir! Itsukushima!”

“...A fine response, but no honorific? I can already tell you’ll be a handful.”

Itsukushima sighed again, then pulled his head back in the window.

Yume decide to play with the wolf dogs until Itsukushima came.

2. Ever Since I Woke Up

Shihoru was bewildered.

No, she was completely perplexed.

Up until they'd reached the mages' guild, in a quiet high-class residential area in a place called East Town, Manato had been guiding her. Now that Manato was gone, she felt lonely, uneasy, and scared.

But in order to become a priest, Manato had to go to the Temple of Lumiaris, which was apparently in North District. She couldn't keep him here.

The mages' guild was an elegant mansion with white walls, and when she mustered the courage to go inside, a woman in the entrance hall kindly took care of her, so she felt just a little relieved.

But later, when she was taken to a waiting room, she was together with a boy named Adachi who wore thick-rimmed black glasses, and he made her feel uncomfortable.

It seemed Adachi had been waiting for a while. He was visibly irritated, and it didn't feel like she could talk to him. Though, even if it had felt like she was welcome to, Shihoru probably couldn't have struck up a conversation herself.

Eventually, a woman in her mid-twenties who, of course, wore a blackish outfit and a blackish hat, led Shihoru and Adachi to another room.

That room with large windows was on the second floor of the building, and a large armchair was placed in front of rows of simple desks and chairs there.

"The wizard will be coming soon," the woman told them. "Please, take any seat you like."

Then she left the room.

"More waiting, huh?" Adachi muttered.

There was a pain in Shihoru's chest. She was no happier to be kept waiting than he was, but being alone with an irate Adachi was even worse.

Adachi took the seat closest to the large armchair. Shihoru sat in the second row from the front, in a window seat. It felt like sitting in the back would be bad, but she didn't want to be beside Adachi.

Adachi occasionally muttered to himself. She couldn't make out what he was saying, but he seemed to be complaining about something or other.

Shihoru did her best not to think about Adachi as she did nothing but wait for the wizard to arrive.

After waiting anxiously, eventually a white-bearded old man in a large hat entered the room. He wasn't alone. The old man was with the black-clothed woman from before, holding on to her arm for support.

His face was so buried beneath his white beard and eyebrows that she couldn't see it, and his back was hunched, so he must have been fairly old.

The old man sat in the large armchair, while the woman stood at his side.

"This is Wizard Sarai," the woman said, introducing him.

Old man Sarai bowed his head slightly.

—or so she originally thought, but it looked like his head was just bobbing as he slept.

No, that couldn't be it. He'd only just sat down in that big chair. He couldn't possibly have fallen asleep yet.

Some time passed like that.

Adachi raised his hand.

In a cold tone, the woman said, "What is it?"

"Is he asleep?" Adachi cut right to the heart of the matter. "The old man there. It looks like he's fallen asleep to me."

"...Wizard Sarai." The woman nudged Sarai's shoulder a little. "Wizard Sarai. —Wizard Sarai. ...Wizard Sarai?"

"...Mweh." Sarai looked up. It looked like he'd really been asleep. "Oh... Is it morning already?"

And he was sleep-addled, too.

"Enough with the jokes." Adachi rose from his seat.

Huh? Huh? Huh? Without so much as a glance to the panicking Shihoru,

Adachi was leaving the room.

“Hey! You! Wait!” The woman chased after him.

And so, Shihoru and Sarai were left alone in the room.

She’d been left behind.

Shihoru was stuck waiting again.

Sarai wasn’t opening his mouth to speak.

Could he be sleeping again?

No, clearly he couldn’t be, right?

But, upon closer inspection, Sarai’s tall hat was swaying. Couldn’t he be “nodding off,” as they called it?

Should she wake him?

No, it wasn’t decided that he was sleeping yet. Wouldn’t it be rude to try to wake him when she didn’t know he was asleep?

That said, she couldn’t leave things like this forever. Even Shihoru had limits to her patience. What exactly should she do here?

Shihoru was bewildered.

No, she was completely perplexed.

Time went by without her being able to do anything but be perplexed, and outside the window, the sun began to go down.

Finally, Shihoru was ready to cry. Not that it would solve anything. It might not, but ever since her awakening, nothing had made sense, and she was sick of it.

She couldn’t take any more. It was hard to see why she should take any more, either. But what else could she do? She had nothing to go on.

In the end, sitting here in silence, for no discernible reason, suited her. She was worthless. There was no value in her living. Even after all this brooding, she couldn’t leave her seat, only bawl her eyes out.

An idiot. I’m such an idiot.

“Hmm...? What’s wrong, girlie...?”

Snapping back to her senses, Shihoru looked to Sarai. She hurriedly wiped her tears away.

Sarai was looking at her. Dark eyes peered out from behind his too-long eyelashes. “Girlie, why are you crying?”

“...N-No... Um... Th-There’s no real reason...”

“Oh, no?” Sarai mumbled a bit, then remained quiet for a while. *Phew*. He let out a sigh, and then slowly began stroking his white beard. “Let me tell you something about mages. We borrow the power of elementals, beings we aren’t even sure are alive or not, to cast magic spells. In short, we are powerless.”

“...Powerless?” Shihoru repeated.

“Indeed. That’s the thing about magic. It’s there for the powerless to use. Look. I’ve lived to over a hundred, but my longevity is all I have going for me. I’m going senile, and I can’t see so well anymore. My legs are no good, either. But still, I can use magic.”

She hadn’t expected to hear he was over a hundred years old, but Shihoru was surprised by how well she could hear his voice given how quiet it was.

He was a mysterious old man.

“Heheh...” Sarai let out a low-pitched laugh as if he saw right through her. “Girlie, you just thought I’m a strange old man, didn’t you?”

“I... I did not.”

“No, the fact is, I *am* a strange old man, I agree. Truly, it’s a bizarre life I’ve led. When I first awoke here in Grimgar, I’d never have believed I’d live to a hundred.”

“S-Sarai... Wizard Sarai... you came here like us?” Shihoru gasped.

“You can call me Gramps.”

“I... I couldn’t...”

“Is that so? Call me Grandfather, then.”

“G... Grandfather.”

“Yes. That will do.” Sarai nodded, motioning for her to come closer. “Come here, girlie. If you’re so far away, I have to speak up. It’s a bit hard on an old man.”

“Y-Yes! I-I’m sorry...”

Shihoru rushed over to sit in the seat Adachi had occupied before. She still couldn’t see the man’s face through his eyebrows and beard, but he seemed satisfied.

“The boy who took off, he’s an impatient one,” Sarai said. “Well, I’m sure Yoruka will handle him. Yoruka, she’s the girl who was leading me by the hand.”

“Oh, Y-Yoruka-san is her name... I see.”

“That girl, too. She was a little girl like you until not so long ago, but now she’s gotten so big. Now, she’s a fine wizard. Much more clear-headed than I. A fine talker, too. Because I’m just an old man, you see. That girl must be over forty now.”

“Huh? F-Forty...?”

“She doesn’t look it, does she?”

“I... I thought she was maybe around twenty-five...”

“Ohhh. If you say that to her, she’ll be pleased, I’m sure. By the by, girlie.”

“...Y-Yes!” Shihoru sat up straight.

This old man likely wasn’t nearly as senile as he claimed. More than that, he might only be pretending to be declining in his old age. Either way, she could be sure he was no ordinary person.

Beyond his white eyebrows, his black pupils shone with an awfully strong light.

A mage.

Those were the eyes of a mage.

“Girlie,” he said.

“...Yes?”

“I’ve been needing to go to the washroom for awhile now. I can’t go alone. I’ll tell you where it is, so could you take me there, perhaps?”

3. The Laws of Nature

The hunter Itsukushima provided Yume with the bare minimum of gear, and immediately took her out into the forest near Alterna.

“I used to be a volunteer soldier like you. But I quit. You know why?”

“Hmm. You wanted money to play around? Or somethin’ like that?”

“I’m not a robber,” he said with exasperation.

“Sorry, Itsukushima. Yume, she just said whatever came to mind!”

“Don’t just say things at random... Well, whatever. Listen up. Ever since joining the hunters’ guild as a volunteer soldier trainee, I’ve always been a hunter. It’s been twenty years now. Life as a hunter suits me, so I wanted to be a hunter more than I wanted to be a volunteer soldier. That’s why I quit being a volunteer soldier and changed trades to be a hunter.”

“Mm-hm. Mm-hm. You’re so cool, Itsukushima.”

“I... I am?”

“Yume wouldn’t know, but she thinks you’re cool. Do you think Yume can become a hunter like you?”

“If you’re serious about it, then maybe. By the way, about the way you address me...”

“Itsukushimaaaa?”

“That. That’s what I mean. You’re not poking fun at me like that, are you?”

“Mew?” Yume crossed her arms and cocked her head to the side. She clapped her hands. She knew what poking fun must mean.

Yume thrust her hands under Itsukushima’s armpits and started wiggling her fingers around.

“Wahah?! Wait?! Hey, Yume?! What are you doing?! Wahahah!

Wahahahah?!”

“This’s it, right? Huh? This’s poking fun at you, right?”

“N-No! Stop! Stop it! I-I’m weak there! Stop...!”

“Okaaaay! Stoppin’ now!”

“Hahh... Hahh... Hahh... Hahh... Wh-What are you doing to me...?”

“Yume thought she was pokin’ some fun at you. Was she wrong?”

“That’s tickling! It may involve poking, and you may think it’s fun, but they’re different things! Okay?!”

“Ohhh. It is, huh? Yume got it wrong. Sorry about that, Itsukushima.”

“There, again! Why do you keep addressing me with no honorific?!”

“But you’re Itsukushima, aren’t you?”

“I’m Itsukushima! Yes, I’m Itsukushima! That is not the point here!”

“What *is* the point here?”

“No, hold on.”

“Holdin’ on.”

“This is wrong. It’s wrong. This isn’t the kind of guy I am. It shouldn’t be. So why...?”

Itsukushima hung his head, mumbling something to himself.

Not sure how long this was going to take, Yume crouched down, resting her hands on her palms so she could relax as she waited.

She was getting sleepier and sleepier, so she sat down on the ground. Her eyelids felt heavy...

“Heyyyyyyy?! What’re you sleeping for?! Is it time to sleep?!” he shouted.

“...Fumew?” Yume raised her face, then waved her hand. “Hey, it’s Itsukushima.”

“Yes, of course I’m Itsukushima! It’d be weird if I changed into someone else, wouldn’t it?!”

“Yeah, it would, huh? But still, Yume, she’s glad you’re Itsukushima.”

“H-How so?”

“Itsukushima, from the very beginnin’, you’ve talked to Yume a lot. You seem like you’ll teach her lots about bein’ a hunter. Yume’s glad she was able to meet you.”

“O-Oh, yeah? W-Well, then. I do plan to teach you. But first. First, we need to make the relationship between us clear.”

“What’s the relationship between Yume and Itsukushima?”

“D-Don’t say that with those beady little eyes upturned. You’re making this harder on me. No, listen, you don’t have to cover your eyes with your hands like that! You can’t see anything that way! It’s dangerous. Be normal. Normal, okay?”

“Normal, huh. Got it. Yume, she’s gonna do her best at bein’ normal.”

“Normal isn’t something you try at, though...”

“Then Yume won’t try!”

“I’m not convinced, but that’s fine... I think? It’s fine, right? I’m losing my confidence here...”

“You are? Well, it’s gonna be okay, Itsukushima. Because you’re a cool hunter.”

“I’m not sure praise from someone who doesn’t know what a hunter is helps...”

“Well, you’ll just have to teach Yume all about it from now on, then!”

“Y-You’re right. That’s what I’m here for, after all... No!”

“Nuh?”

“If you’re going to enter the hunters’ guild, I’m going to be your father. By the way, if I were a woman, I’d be your mother.”

“Whaaaa?! You were a girl?!”

“I’m a man, as you can clearly see! I never said a word about me being a

woman!”

“Oh, you didn’t? Huh. Yume was surprised.”

“You jumped to a conclusion way too quickly there,” he said with frustration. “And let me tell you, I’m not normally so talkative. I’m more taciturn. I’m a hunter, after all... Well, we’ll set that aside. Erm, what were we talking about again...?”

“About how you’re Yume’s mother? Was that it? Mom? Huh...?”

“Father, you mean. Father. Even among wild beasts, though not all of them, there’s a bond between parent and child. The mother and father teach their children to survive. In reflection of this law of nature, the hunters’ guild has experienced hunters become fathers who show inexperienced hunters the way.”

“Ooooooh. Sounds complicated. Yume’s got herself all tied up in thoughts.”

“Because of your misunderstandings, I’ve got myself all tied in thoughts, no, I mean knots, too...”

“Sorry, Itsukushima. Yume may’ve mislearned some things.”

“I-It’s fine. No big deal. You don’t have to apologize... No, no, it’s not fine!”

“Well, could you tell Yume what’s wrong with her? Make it clear and bright.”

“How do I make it clear and bright...?”

“Hmm. Flash! Like that, maybe?”

“...Sorry,” Itsukushima sighed. “I think that’s a little... no, completely impossible for me. This is going nowhere, so let’s drop it. Okay?”

“Okay, Itsukushima.”

“That!”

“Foo? What?”

“Who addresses their father like that?!”

“It’s no good, huh? A father’s a dad, right? You don’t talk to your dad without honorifics? Oh, but Yume, she doesn’t remember her dad or her mom. Why do

you think that is, Itsukushima?”

“I don’t think asking me is going to help. It’s weird, but now that I think about it, all I can say is that’s just how things are.”

“It’s just how things are?”

“O-Okay. You’re having trouble getting this father stuff. Listen: basically, I’m your master.”

“Ohh. You’re Yume’s master.”

“That’s right. You wouldn’t address your master without an honorific, would you?”

“Maybe not. Yume, she probably hasn’t had a master before you, so she wouldn’t know.”

“I-I’m your first, then. Well... I imagine I would be, yeah.”

“Master, huh? Okay! In that case, Yume just has to call you Master, right?”

“It’s better than no honorific, yes. Do that.”

“Well, that’s what she’ll do from now on.” Yume bowed her head. “Yume’s got her shortenings, but she hopes you’ll treat her kindly, Master.”

“...R-Right.”

Itsukushima, no, Master scratched his neck and looked away for some reason.

“Likewise... Also, it’s shortcomings. I think you mean shortcomings there...”

4. Troublemaker

Shihoru took Grandfather, AKA Wizard Sarai, by the hand. Together they walked down the corridor, Shihoru carefully supporting him so he wouldn’t fall over, and she opened the door.

Grandfather’s room was in the back of the second floor of the mages’ guild. It was quite roomy, and though the furniture wasn’t too gaudy, it did look quite luxurious. Everything but the bed and the couch saw hardly any use.

Shihoru sat Grandfather down on the couch, made the bed, and then went to

get a pot with a herbal decoction in it which had been left outside the room.

She gave Grandfather his medicine, then took off his robe and wizard hat. He was already wearing pajamas underneath, so he was ready to go to sleep.

She took him to the bed, helping him to lie down, and stayed by his side to talk to him until he could get to sleep.

“Girlie,” the man said.

“...Yes, Grandfather?”

“Listen. It’s elementals. For us mages, the first thing, and the second thing, is elementals. What are elementals?”

“Magical creatures, right?”

“Indeed. And yet, even we mages do not know their true nature. In their normal state, elementals are invisible to us. We cannot hear their voices.”

“Yes. But... we can feel them.”

“Mysteriously, the elementals will not let themselves be sensed by those who do not believe they can feel them,” Grandfather said. “But elementals most certainly do exist. That is why we can use magic.”

“Elementals... they hide in the soft wind... breathe in the raging storm...”

“Elementals: they abide in standing pools of water, and are carried in the flowing current...”

“Elementals... they dance in the flickering flames... and in the rising inferno...”

“Elementals: they—”

Suddenly, Grandfather stopped.

Flustered, Shihoru brought her ear close to his mouth.

He was breathing. Softly. He was snoring a little. It seemed he’d fallen asleep.

She breathed a sigh of relief. “Thank goodness.”

Relieved, Shihoru moved away from the bed. Turning out the lights, she left the room. Feeling the exhaustion hit her all at once, she wanted to crouch down.

“It’s like... I’m nursing him...”

Technically, Grandfather had been teaching her all day long. He’d taught her everything there was to know about elementals. Today, on her third day of basic training, she had started to be able to sense elementals, though only vaguely. Him praising her aptitude had made her happy.

But still, Grandfather was extremely old. He might have been exceptionally sharp, and he apparently didn’t forget things that often, but his body was still in decline.

First of all, he couldn’t walk alone. He needed help to eat, too.

No, he might have been able to manage that without assistance, if necessary, but it would probably take him a long time.

He seemed likely to spill things, too, so cleaning up after him would be a lot of work. It was better if someone helped him eat.

As might have been expected, changing his clothes was another thing Grandfather struggled to do alone. Wizard Yoruka gave him a sponge bath every morning, then changed all his clothes, so Shihoru only had to take off his robe at night. That did help.

Regardless, she was practically nursing him.

That was fine, but if she was going to be learning from an old man so infirm that he needed nursing, Shihoru needed to be considerate in a lot of ways.

Frankly, she was worried for his health. It concerned her that the seven days of basic training which were assigned to everyone who joined the mages’ guild might actually be harder on Grandfather than Shihoru.

He was the oldest mage, after all, and like a living encyclopedia. What would she do if his health took a turn for the worse?

Shihoru was beside herself with worry, and putting it that way was no exaggeration.

Shihoru was sleeping in a small room on the first floor of the guild. Her room only had a bed, so sleeping was all she could do there. The only other places she could enter freely were the bath, the washroom, and the library.

The library was the largest room in the guild. There were desks and chairs surrounded by shelves of books.

Shihoru made a point of spending time in the library every night until she got sleepy.

The library had a manager called a bookwatcher on duty, and there were always people reading books there, but the rules forbade talking. So if Shihoru sat there with an open book no one bothered her. No one even looked at Shihoru.

The books in the library were made of parchment or paper, and all of the writing was done by hand.

When she'd first seen them, she'd been impressed that they were all handwritten, but when she thought about that, she wasn't sure why.

When she was sitting in a chair, by lamplight, reading a text that someone had written out character by character, it helped her relax.

Shihoru liked the sound of flipping pages.

As she was staring down at a book, someone else turned a page. The slightly heavy sound of sheepskin parchment. The light sound of paper. As she listened, gradually, drowsiness set in.

She was almost at her limit. No, she might already have been half-asleep.

Shihoru closed her book and stood up. Returning her book and leaving the library behind, she came across Wizard Yoruka in the hall.



“Ah!” Shihoru hurriedly bowed her head. “G-G-Good evening...”

“Reading?” the woman asked. “So late? I can see you’re very passionate.”

“N-N... No, I’m not, not at all...”

“Continue to exert yourself.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am!”

Raising her face, Shihoru glanced at Yoruka. Or that was what she’d intended to do, but she ended up staring.

“Yes?” Yoruka asked.

“N-No...”

“If you have something to say, then say it.”

“N-No... N-Nothing, really...”

“You must. That was the look in your eyes just now. You mean to lie to me? That takes some courage.”

“I... I-I-I’m not lying...”

Shihoru’s head spun. Her face—no, her entire body—was burning. She started to sweat profusely.

Yoruka made no attempt to move.

Shihoru did not move, either.

“I... I just... um... I just...”

“Just what?” Yoruka asked.

“I... I was just thinking... you’re p-pretty... that’s all...”

“Is your sight poor? Or is it your aesthetic sense that’s impaired?”

“Huh...? No, um, my, uh, a-aesthetic... sense? It’s... w-well, I don’t know, but... m-my eyes are fine... I think...”

“Flattery, then, is it?”

“F-Flattery...? No, not at all...”

“Is it spite?”

“Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Why would you say that?”

“My looks are average,” Yoruka said. “Not pretty. They’re completely ordinary.”

That was plainly untrue. The fact was, while Yoruka might not have been some otherworldly beauty, she was quite pretty. She was tall, and she wore clothes that hid the outline of her body, so it was hard to tell about her figure, but she wasn’t fat, and was probably on the thin side.

If she was average, what did that make Shihoru?

Wasn’t Yoruka the one being spiteful here?

Shihoru had a lot of thoughts about it, but if she came out and spoke her mind, she would be criticizing a wizard. She couldn’t do that. She mustn’t.

That said, could she really say nothing? It might not be good to stay silent, right? Should she make an excuse? Or explain, rather?

“U-Um...” Shihoru attempted, “th-the truth is, I’m not, uh... f-flattering you, or sucking up. That’s not it... it’s just... y-y-you don’t look anywhere near as old as I—”

As she stammered, she realized this was a mistake.

No one even looked at Shihoru.

They might both be women, but Shihoru should never bring up the topic of age. That was obvious. Normally, Shihoru wouldn’t have. It was because she’d panicked. But that was no excuse. She had to apologize.

“I-I-I-I-I’m sorry! Excuse me! I apologize!”

“I turned 27 the other day,” Yoruka said.

“...Come again?”

The blood drained from her face so fast that Shihoru could feel it. She had to be pale as a sheet right now.

“T-Twenty... seven...”

“It was Wizard Sarai, wasn’t it?”

“Ah...! Y-Yes, ma’am...”

“How old did Wizard Sarai claim I am?”

“Th-That’s...”

“Tell me honestly.”

“O-Over... forty... he said...”

“That geezer,” Yoruka muttered.

“Huh? Gee...zer...?”

“Pardon me,” Yoruka smiled.

It was the first smile Shihoru had seen from her. When she smiled, she had to be at least ten times prettier.

But she was ten times scarier.

“I will have a talk with Wizard Sarai about this,” Yoruka announced. “You continue to be diligent in your training.”

“Y-Yes, ma’am. U-Under...stood.”

“Now, go to bed.” Yoruka walked off.

Shihoru let out a great sigh, then stumbled back to her room.

There were four rooms that seemed to be for those in basic training. They were all individual rooms, but in terms of size, it was like someone had just put a door on a bed. The ceiling was low, too.

When she went to open the door of the room assigned to her, the door next to hers opened, and a boy who wore thick-rimmed glasses came out.

“Oh!” Shihoru gasped. “Um... H-Hello...”

She reflexively bowed her head.

Adachi looked at her and scowled. “Still awake, are you?”

“Oh... b-but I was about to lie down...”

“What do I care? Whether you’re awake or asleep, it makes no difference to

me.”

“S-Sorry...”

Shihoru hurried into her room and collapsed on her bed. Then she let out another sigh.

Even though she was exhausted, she was wide awake.

She wouldn't be getting to sleep for awhile.

5. He Was a Stern Father

Master effortlessly nocked an arrow to his bow, drew back the bowstring, and loosed it.

When he did, *whoosh* flew the arrow, and *thock...* it stabbed into the tree he'd aimed at.

“Wow!” Yume clapped despite herself.

Master lowered the bow, looking sideways to her.

“...Listen. How many times have I shown you this now? You don't need to clap. This is no time to be getting giddy.”

“Oh, yeah. But, y'know, when Yume sees Master shootin' his bow, every time she thinks, ‘That's so cool! That's so pretty!’”

“I don't care about your impressions. Do as I did.”

“Sure. Got it! Yume, she's gonna try!”

Yume stood beside Master, drawing an arrow from her quiver and nocking it.

“Listen, Yume,” he said. “The truth is, there's no fixed form in archery.”

“Fixdorm?”

“...No. I said ‘no fixed form.’ What did you even think a fixdorm is?”

“Meow!”

“Hey! What are you suddenly shooting for?! I was in the middle of trying to explain it to you, you know?! Listen, then shoot! This is common sense!”

“Ohh. Sorry. It missed, too.”

“...Just listen.”

“Listenin’!”

“Your responses are good, if nothing else... well, whatever. Like I was saying. There’s no fixed form in archery. There are, of course, some dos and don’ts. But if you just get those down, you can shoot however you like. So long as you hit your target, that is.”

“Mm-hm, mm-hm.”

“So, once you learn how to hit your targets, just shoot the same way every time. No matter what happens, don’t change. Don’t bend. Don’t waver. You stick to it, and you’ll never miss your mark.”

“You’ll never piss or bark?”

“No, miss your mark. Miss. Your. Mark. Get it?”

“Mister Mark?”

“No... Oh, whatever. It doesn’t matter. Forget it.”

“Yume, she’s gonna forget it!”

“Good.” When Master grinned, he was quick to hide the bottom half of his face with his hand, for some reason. “A-Anyway, you can imitate what I do or find your own way, but the first thing is to hit your target. If you hit, repeat what you did, until muscle memory kicks in.”

“Muscle memory. Got it!”

“Now do it.”

“Doin’ it!”

Yume fired her bow.

She fired, and fired, and fired, and fired, and picked up the arrows once her quiver was empty, and put the arrows back in the quiver, and fired, and fired, and fired, and fired.

She just kept firing.

“Yume.”

“Nuwah?”

“That’s enough. Stop for now.”

“Got it. Yume, she’s gonna stop for now.”

“How did you not hit even once...?” Master was clutching his head.

Yume rubbed Master’s back. “Master, you okay? What’s wrong?”

“No, it’s not a ‘what.’ It’s you. You fired a hundred times and still missed. That’s a godly trick you pulled off there.”

“Ohh... It’s Yume’s fault, then. Sorry, Master.”

“I don’t know that I’d say it’s your fault. It’s a mystery to me. Even a total amateur ought to get the occasional lucky hit. It’s not like you aren’t reaching the target because of a lack of strength, so how did you miss every time?”

“How do you think? Yume, she’s aimin’ at that tree like she oughta be, but, *zoom*, the arrows go flyin’ off in a whole other direction!”

“Something is wrong. Something... Your form isn’t that weird. What’s the problem?”

“Maybe Yume’s got no talent!”

“You moron!” he suddenly yelled at her.

Yume pulled her hands back reflexively.

Master looked around awkwardly. “No... sorry. It’s just... um... Y-You can’t say that. Don’t blame talent so easily. There’s a cause somewhere. I just have no idea what it is... Maybe it’s my fault?”

“You’re not doin’ anythin’ wrong, Master!” Yume declared.

“Y-Yeah? I-I guess...”

“Yeah! Master, you’re doin’ your best to teach Yume. You’re not wrong. Yume’s the one shootin’ the arrows, so it’s Yume’s fault if they don’t hit.”

“Well, yes, but...”

“Master, that’s how it is, so cheer up, okay?”

“R-Right. No, hold on, *you* should be a bit more depressed...”

“Is gettin’ depressed gonna make the arrows hit?”

“No, probably not. You have a point. Getting depressed isn’t going to help.”

“It won’t help? Well, that’s a problem.”

“Tell me about it.” Master cleared his throat, taking one step away from Yume. “Just so we’re clear, I want to straighten out one misconception.”

“Sure. Yume, she’s listenin’.”

“I’m... well... you know. I’ve had a number of students before, and all of them have told me I’m a strict father.”

“But you’re so nice, Master!”

“That’s where you’re misunderstanding.”

“Yume’s misunderstanding?”

“That’s right... Honestly, people are even a little terrified of me. I’ve even had a guy run away during basic training. Just one, but it happened.”

“Yume’s not gonna be runnin’ away, though.”

“O-Oh, yeah?”

“Cause bein’ with Master’s fun!”

“It... It is?”

“Master, is bein’ with Yume unpleasant for you?”

“N-No, it’s not.” Master hid the bottom half of his face, then, on top of that, he turned away. “Of course it’s not... you dummy.”

“Oh, good. If you hated Yume, she’d be super sad, you know?”

“I-I could never hate...” Master suddenly coughed and cleared his throat.

Yume rubbed Master’s back again. “Master, are you okay? Have you got a cold? If you do, keep warm, okay?”

“I-It’s not a cold. I’m fine. I don’t catch colds. I never get sick. I’ve got a good, healthy body, so this is... nothing.”

“Well, good. Yume, she was gettin’ worried, you know?”

“S-Sorry... No, no, no! What am I apologizing for? Damn it, listen up, Yume!”

“Yes, siiiir!”

“That’s a good response.”

“Yay!”

“No, that’s not it... This is a declaration! The other mothers and fathers return to the guild during basic training, but we won’t! Because I’m strict!”

“Oho!”

“In the basic training I have for you, you won’t be going back to the guild once! We’re living in the wild the whole time! How’s that? You can’t bathe, and the mosquitoes are relentless, that’s got to be hard on a girl like you! I’m strict!”

“Fwooooooooooo!” Yume cried, excited.

“Wh-Why are your eyes sparkling like that?”

“This’s gonna be so much fun! Livin’ with Master in the woods the whole time! Takin’ baths is nice, but you only stink if you don’t! Oh, but, Master, are you okay with a stinky Yume?”

“You don’t smell that bad... I mean, I think I’ve got a beastly smell to me, too. I can’t really tell myself, though...”

“Beastly smell?” Yume brought her face up to Master’s chest, sniffing him. “...Nuh? You do smell. Is it beastly? Huh? Well, it’s not unpleasant. It’s not a nice smell, but it’s a smell Yume could get hooked on.”

“Wh-Whoa, Yume.”

“Mew?”

“S-Stop it! No... D-Don’t sniff me!”

“Why not?”

“J-Just stop!” Master took two, three steps back, then hung his head. “...This is weird. It’s not supposed to be like this. I’m a solitary hunter, and a strict father, and my students hate me...”

“Ah!”

“Wh-What?” Master asked.

“Yume, she wants to practice with the bow some more. Can she?”

“...S-Sure. That’s fine. Of course. You’re enthusiastic.”

“Well, sure!”

Yume took a stance with the bow, without nocking an arrow, and drew back the bowstring.

Was this it? Or did she need to change her facing? There were all sorts of things she could try adjusting.

“If Yume doesn’t get good with the bow, she’ll feel bad for you,” she announced.

“Y-You...” When she looked over, Master was covering the bottom of his face. “Would you stop that?”

“Stop? Stop what? Huh?”

“Forget me. I don’t matter. You practice for you.”

“Well, sure. But Yume wants to work hard for her master, too. Is that wrong?”

“It’s not wrong, but still!”

“Well, then Yume’s gonna do her best for herself and for her master, too!”

“Oh, yeah? Do your best.”

“Yume’s gonna do her best!”

“Do your best, Yume...”

6. The Trap

It was the fourth day of basic training when Grandfather suddenly complained that he was feeling unwell.

“Urgh... Th-This is bad...”

“Grandfather?! Wh-Wh-Wh-What’s the matter?!” Shihoru exclaimed.

“Ngh, ngh, ngh...”

Grandfather clutched his chest, leaning over in his chair. He might fall out of his chair like that.

Shihoru got up, rushed over to him, making sure he at least didn't collapse.

“Nnngh... Nnngh... Nnngh... This is bad...” Grandfather closed his eyes and let out a low groan.

Shihoru looked around in vain. “Wh-What can I do...? Sh-Should I call someone?”

“N-No... It's fine...”

“B-But...!”

“Let me rest a little... Here... Urgh...”

“Y-Yes, that's okay,” Shihoru said fearfully.

“Ohh... No... My strength... It's fail...ing... me...”

“I-I'll support you!”

Shihoru put her arms around Grandfather and held him to give him support when he looked ready to keel over.

Grandfather's whole body was quivering. There was no other noticeable change, but he was old, so he probably had an existing condition or two. She wouldn't have been surprised by anything.

Maybe she should call someone. However, ever since the first time she'd met Grandfather, no other mage had come near the classroom they were using for lessons.

If she was going to call for help, she'd have to leave the room. If she did, she'd have to leave Grandfather alone. That worried her.

“I'm fine... I'm fine, so... Leave me... Let me stay like this... Let me rest like this, for just a little while...”

“I... I under...stand. Um, does it... hurt somewhere? If something's wrong, please, tell me. Please...”

“Yes... I’ll... do that...”

This being an emergency, she couldn’t fault him for it, but Grandfather’s face was pressed up against her chest. Was that making it hard for him to breathe?

“U-Um, Grandfather,” Shihoru ventured.

“Yes... What is it...?”

“Y-You’re not suffering... are you?”

“No... Not at all... It feels nice, actually. No...”

“Huh...?”

“I’m fine... Fine... Yes... Fine...”

Next, Grandfather put his arm around Shihoru’s back—no, her butt—squeezing tight.

Was he feeling better? If he was, thank goodness. But...

“G-Grandfather...?” Shihoru asked nervously.

“Yes...”

“E-Erm...”

“What is it...?”

“I hate to say this... but...”

“Hmm...?”

“Th-The way you’re touching my butt is a little...”

“...Yes?” Grandfather pulled his face away from Shihoru’s chest. “Ohh. Pardon me. Sorry, sorry. It just happened.”

“N-No. It’s fine... if you’d just stop. Wh-Why are you still rubbing my butt?”

“Hmm!” This time, Grandfather pulled his hand away from Shihoru’s butt, then laughed in embarrassment. “Sorry, sorry. Didn’t mean any harm.”

“H-Harm?”

“Girlie,” Grandfather said. “Your butt felt so comfortable to the touch, I felt sad to part with it. There’s no reason other than that.”

“Y-You mean—” Shihoru pushed Grandfather against the back of his chair.
“Th-This was just plain sexual harassment?!?”

“Sexual harassment?” Grandfather cocked his head to the side. “This may be my old age talking, but I don’t know what you mean. I was rubbing your buttocks with the purest of intentions, have no doubt.”

“Don’t try to turn this around...”

“I am doing no such thing!” This was the first time Shihoru saw Grandfather open his eyes wide in front of her. “I love girls’ butts!! I love boobs! I am in love with every part of the girl! I don’t want to take on any boys for basic training! I want to spend what little time I have left with girls! Is that wrong?! No! Certainly not! I maintain absolute confidence in my righteousness!”

“D-Did you deliberately make it so Adachi-kun would get impatient...?”

“Correct!”

“What is wrong with you...?” Shihoru muttered.

“Don’t you worry about me, girly,” Grandfather smirked.

“You’re full of energy, too...”

“I’m 107 this year! No matter how much I love girls, all I can do is breathe air in the same room as them, and if I see a chance, maybe touch them a liiiittle, nothing else! It’s tragic that I can’t do aaaanything else...”

“That’s... not my problem...”

“Could you possibly understand my vexation, girly?!”

“Not at all! And I don’t want to!”

“My word! Not understanding your own master’s feelings! You fail as an apprentice!”

“Fine! Whatever! Fail me! I’ll learn from Wizard Yoruka, like Adachi-kun!”

“You fool! Yoruka is my student! I am her teacher! She can say what she likes, but Yoruka can never defy me!”

“You’re horrible!!”

“Call me what you will! Mwahahahahah! Girlie! I’m not letting you escape until your basic training is over!”

Shihoru bit her lip.

She was frustrated.

But more than that, she was sad.

Shihoru had never suspected Grandfather in the slightest. She’d cared for him, and tried to help. That was all.

Grandfather had taken advantage of Shihoru’s feelings. Because Shihoru was his apprentice, you could say he’d taken advantage of her weaker position as someone who had to look after him.

“Does it hurt, girlie?!” Grandfather cackled like a devil. “Do you feel betrayed?! Well, know this! All the boys out there in the world are worse than me! I’m doing you a service, teaching you the harshness of reality!”

“Boys?” Shihoru repeated in horror.

Was that true? Shihoru collapsed to the floor.

She was scared. Scared. Scared! Grandfather was decrepit with old age, so she had gotten off lightly. If he had been a healthy young man, what might he have done to her? What horrible things?

“Fwahahahahahahahahaha!” the horrible old man laughed. “Girlie! Know the darkness of this world, and grow to become a woman!”

Shihoru shook her head. She wanted to cry. Or rather, she was already half-crying. The tears were ready to flow.

Just in time, the door to the classroom opened, and Wizard Yoruka came in.

“Fwuh...” Seeing Yoruka, Grandfather clearly started to panic.

Yoruka was the opposite.

She strode towards him with no expression, then chopped him in the head with an open hand.

“Agh...!”

“You filthy old man.”

“Y-You... Yo-Yoruka, how dare you do this to your teach—”

“Silence,” she ordered.

“Urkh...”

“To think you would still act the same even after turning 100. How can you have grown so little? I am too appalled for words, Wizard Sarai.”

“Th-The seething passion of my soul, which still seeks adventure, even after turning 100, is something to be praised! I-Isn’t it?! Right, girlie?!”

“Huh...? You’re turning to me on this?!” Shihoru exclaimed.

“You’re my apprentice, aren’t you? Be a good apprentice, and give me an out! Help me!”

“...N-No.”

“Gasp!”

“Now listen, girlie,” Yoruka said.

Shihoru was shocked to find that even Yoruka was calling her “girlie” now.

“This old man is the oldest, most respected mage alive, but he is also infamous, and especially scorned by female mages, who keep their distance,” Yoruka told her. “His knowledge and talent as a mage, however, is genuine. He is one of the few mages in Grimgar who has attained true magic. His teachings will, undoubtedly, become an invaluable asset to you as a mage. You may not understand that now, but with time, you will. However, if you find yourself unable to deal with the old coot’s behavior, I am willing to take over as your instructor for the rest of your basic training. What will you do?”

7. Feet

Master pressed his raised index finger to his lips. That was the sign for, *Don’t talk. Be quiet.*

Yume nodded, and then Master walked down the game trail in a low posture.

Yume followed behind him.

The game trail was really narrow—not wide enough that people could walk down it normally, but it had been well trodden down. There wasn't much grass there, and hardly any dry branches had fallen on it. That was why, so long as they progressed with caution, they could sneak along silently with relative ease.

Master came to a stop, hiding himself in the shadow of a tree. Yume was right nearby, imitating him.

Master looked around the area, moving his eyes more than he turned his head.

Yume did the same thing.

The birds and the bugs chirped.

The wind blew.

Leaves rustled.

Yume.

Master hadn't spoken out loud. Yet, still, Yume knew she had been called.

Looking over, Master was signaling, *Follow me.*

Yume nodded.

They continued moving down the game trail awhile longer.

Up ahead, Master suddenly came to a dead stop. He must have found something. Where, and what?

Yume wanted to ask, but she desperately resisted the urge.

Eventually, Master approached a nearby bush and crouched down. Yume stuck close to him.

Somethin' there? Yume asked that with her eyes, and Master pointed.

She stuck her head out of the bushes, looking in that direction.

She nearly let out a gasp, but Yume hurriedly covered her mouth with both hands.

It's a wolf...!

It resembled the wolf-dogs raised by the guild. It had a similar build and fur, but it was completely different.

First, its fur was almost all white. Second, it wasn't just big, it was strong. Yet, despite that, it was also nimble.

It's cute...

For some reason, Yume teared up.

If she could, she wanted to pet it. To hug it. And if that wasn't possible, she wanted to at least get closer.

Probably she couldn't. If they could get any closer, Master would have done it.

That wolf was clearly difficult to approach. It was a being that humans couldn't become close with.

That might have been why Yume was crying.

The white wolf turned their way. It fixed its eyes on Yume.

It was probably only a moment. But there was no questioning it: Yume and the white wolf had looked into one another's eyes.

The white wolf suddenly turned to face forward again, and ran. Its movements were swift and easy, its feet light.

In no time it was off into the distance, then out of sight.

Master let out a sigh. "Well, it's good fortune just to have been able to see one. That was no ordinary wolf."

"Ohhhhh. It wasn't?"

"I told you about the White God Elhit, right?"

"Yep, yep. That's the reeeeeaaaal big, reeeeeaaaal white wolf god, right?"

"Elhit rules over all nature—or rather, is a symbol of nature as a whole. From the time this land of Grimgar was born, Elhit has been there, and should Elhit ever die, the land shall too, they say. Basically, Elhit must be incredibly grand, an incarnation of a massive power far beyond our understanding."

“A musty powwow beyond our standing, huh?” Yume pondered. “Hmm...”

“You’ve mangled that horribly, but whatever. —Moving on. Great white wolves like that one, they’re seen as Elhit’s kin.”

“Kings?” Yume asked.

“Kin... Um, family, not royalty. Kin are, well... it’s like they share the same blood. It’s a mystery how they can bear the blood of a god, but that’s the belief.”

“Mwuhoooo! Soooo, that white wolf, it’s the child of a god?”

“No, it’s probably not the child.”

“The grandchild, then?”

“I doubt they’re that closely related. But sure, grandchild.”

“The grandchild, huh? Or maybe great-grandchild?”

“Could be.” Master patted Yume on the head.

He didn’t do it often, but when Master patted her head, Yume felt like she’d become a wolf or a dog. Master had to be really good at petting wolf-dogs. It felt good, so she wished he’d do it more.

“Nyunh, nyuh!” she said.

“...Urkh.” Master pulled his hand back. “S-Sorry.”

“Fwuh? For what?”

“I touched you without meaning to.”

“Master, is it wrong for you to be touchin’ Yume?”

“I-It’s not a good thing.”

“Why not?”

“Why? You... Um, well, I’m supposed to be your father, so there’s an appropriate amount of distance we should keep between us, so...”

“Distance?” Yume asked.

“Not too close, not too far, I guess?”

“Oh, yeah? Guess that’s how it goes.”

“I-It is, you know?”

“Yume doesn’t want to part with you, though. Does she have to move away?”

“N-No...!” Master seemed to struggle for some reason, clutching at his own chest. “There may not be any need... for us to part. It’s just, um, that sense of distance... Right, that’s right, distance... If we get too close, you know? There are issues...”

“Issues?” she protested.

“Yume, you’re puffing up your cheeks way too much...”

“Well, hey! Yume, she doesn’t know anything about what you’re talkin’ about! What’re these issues, huh?!”

“U-Um, well, you...”

“Yume and Master, they get along great!”

“We don’t... get along terribly, no.”

“They get along great, right?”

“Y-Yeah, sure, great... But still.”

“Yume, she’s learned a whooooole lot about bein’ a hunter from you. Issues? There’re no issues here, are there? Is she wrong?”

“Y-You’re not wrong... no.”

“Well then, this is fine. Right?”

“I... I guess so.”

“So, keep on doin’ it. Once in a while, give Yume a pet, would you?”

“O-Okay.” Master nodded awkwardly. “Only once in a while, okay?”

“Okay!”

“Damn it...”

“Foo? What’s wrong?”

“N-Nothing’s wrong... Nothing... Damn it. What’s wrong with me? It’s never

been like this before. If anything, I'm a misanthrope, and that's why I washed my hands of the whole volunteer soldiering business..."

"Master, you want to wash your hands? Next time, should Yume wash your feet for you, too?"

"Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Wh-Why would you wash my feet?!"

"Yume, she's always bein' looked after by you. That's why, yeah, she wants to wash your feet for you."

"Nooooooo! No, thank you! I'll wash my own feet! I mean, m-m-m-m-my feet are filthy!"

"Nuoh? That's why they'd need washin', though. If they weren't dirty, you wouldn't have to wash them. Oh. If they're that dirty, they've gotta be worth cleanin' up, so Yume's definitely gonna wash your feet!"

"I said no...! It's embarrassing! Seriously, you don't have to...!"

8. The Last

"Girlye," Grandfather announced.

"...What is it?" Shihoru managed.

"You must think I'm an old fart who's all talk."

"Not at all..."

"No. You do. You *absolutely* do. I can tell these things, you know? Ever since that one time, your attitude towards me has changed. Massively, too. I'm honestly not that senile, you know? You know that, at least."

"I-If you aren't senile, could we not have this same conversation several times a day... please?"

"Ah! Ahhh! Ahhhhh!"

"Wh-What is it?"

"Are you suuuure it's okay? Talking to a wizard like that? I think it's a weeee bit rude. Now, listen. I didn't just get old without doing anything, you know? Yet

I'm not feeling the slliiightest bit of respect. I don't knooooow. Is that okay? You're hurting me here. If you'd give me a massage, though, girly, this pain miiiight go away."

In a classroom alone with Grandfather, Shihoru hung her head, letting out the latest of who knew how many hundreds of sighs.

Why? Why had Shihoru refused Wizard Yoruka's kind offer that time?

Yoruka was cool and analytical, and they said she was the youngest wizard. Even from the short exchanges they'd had, she could tell the woman was very smart. A little frightening, maybe, but if she had to learn from someone, a person like that was the best.

Shihoru was probably spoiled. A little harsh treatment was sure to be good for her.

Grandfather, meanwhile, was a depraved pervert.

He seemed to know more about magic, and having been, according to his own claim, practicing as a mage for ninety years, it would be strange if he didn't. Grandfather said he'd been a mage for ninety years, but a man for over a hundred, so it was only natural that his male instincts would win out over the intellectual curiosity, spirit of discovery, and drive for self-improvement that came with being a mage.

She sort of understood that logic, and sort of didn't. No, she understood what he was saying; it was just, uh, super gross. If there was a person still obsessing over carnal lust at over one hundred years of age, Shihoru could only think they were a monster. So why...?

There was just one thing that might have sufficed as a reason: what Yoruka had said.

"His teachings will, undoubtedly, become an invaluable asset to you as a mage. You may not understand that now, but with time, you will."

It was true, she absolutely did not understand now.

However, she felt Wizard Yoruka was far more trustworthy than Grandfather. Because Grandfather was a liar, while Yoruka probably wasn't.

Yoruka had told her that, if Shihoru found herself unable to deal with the old coot's behavior, she was willing to take over as her instructor for the rest of her basic training. But that could also be interpreted as her advising that, if she could tolerate him, it would be better to have Grandfather teach her.

That suggested Grandfather's basic training would have enough value that it was worth bearing with the unpleasant treatment.

And there was one other thing. If Shihoru had Yoruka teach her, that would mean, for a certainty, that she would have to sit next to Adachi. She did, to some degree, want to avoid that. His type, the kind of person who thought he was a genius, actually was sharp, and looked down on others, was hard for her to deal with. Even being around him was suffocating.

"I-I'm not... g-giving you a massage," Shihoru said. "I mean, I can't."

"Just a lllllight one is fine. If you'd just ever so soooooftly touch the places I tell you to, that would be perfect."

"I'm sure you're planning to make me touch you in weird places... right?"

"Weird places, like wheeeere? Could you teeeell me? Well, girly? Where? What spot? What spoooot?"

"I-I don't know! H-How would I...?!"

"Aww, you're soooo cuuute. Getting all embarrassed. Girly, you're cuuute. Uweheheh!"

"I-I'm not cute at all!" Shihoru cried. "I-I'm... f-fat..."

"Nweheheh! You certainly do have a bit of meat on your bones, girly."

"I-I know. That's why I told you, I'm fat..."

"It's nothing to worry about," Grandfather smirked. "It comes with youth. Besides, your meat is of good quality. It'll feel excellent to touch. Eheheheheh..."

"Urrrrrrrrrrgh...!" Shihoru felt a chill.

But...

Shihoru's face was turned down, but her lips were secretly turned up.

She'd won.

Shihoru had overcome this trial.

"Gufufufuh... Nuhuhuhuhuhuh... Hahh! Hah! Hah! Hah! Hah...!
Hahhhhhhh..."

Grandfather let out a sigh that was far too big.

"It's already ending, huh."

Yes. That was right.

Grandfather had taken every chance to try and touch Shihoru, make her touch him, say obscene things, and make her say them, so her basic training felt like it had lasted an eternity, but finally it was ending.

Looking back on it, the time she had spent in Grandfather's lectures laced with obscene stories as she'd learned about elementals and magic, the times she'd meditated in front of the old man who was distraction incarnate, the times she'd practiced casting simple spells under his malicious direction, they were all good memories—was one thing she would never say, even under pain of death, but they had been at least somewhat to her benefit.

If nothing else, there was a feeling of accomplishment that came with having endured.

It was unlikely she'd ever go through anything this unpleasant again, too.

It might not be a good memory, but it had been a good experience—maybe.

"Grandfather... thank you for taking care of me," Shihoru said.

"For my part, I wish you'd keep on 'taking care' of me, girly..."

"I-I'll pass."

"You should give up on this volunteer soldier business, girly. It's nothing but danger. It doesn't suit you."

"I appreciate your concern, but..."

"Of course I'm concerned! What would I do if my girl got herself hurt?! When I think of any wounds on that young, supple body..."

“I... I have my comrades to consider.”

“Girlie, if you got roughed up by orcs, or goblins, why... I’d be a little, no, very! Very aroused!”

“...Thank you again.”

“My girlieeee! Ohhhhhhhhhh! I... I can’t take this...!”

“I’m not yours....”

“Enough!” Grandfather suddenly stood up from his chair. With swift motions, not at all like those of a man who was 107 years old. He was so energetic, it was terrifying. “Girlie! I challenge you!”

“...Say what?”

“Fire a Magic Missile at me!”

“Huh? B-But... that’s...”

“Don’t underestimate me because of my age, girlie! I’ll show you the difference in level between us as mages!”

“Th-The difference in level...? I just entered the guild... I only know one spell, too, there’s no challenge here...”

“It’s fine, just shoot! I’ll show you what true magic is!”

“...True magic?”

That caught her attention, if only a little.

Wizard Yoruka had mentioned it before. Grandfather was one of the few mages in Grimgar who had attained true magic.

What exactly was that true magic? Shihoru had no clue. But Grandfather was saying he was going to teach her now.

It probably wasn’t anything she could understand yet, but like Yoruka said, this might become a valuable asset to her, and come in handy one day.

“O... Okay!”

Shihoru took her training staff, which was leaning against her desk, and stood up.

Grandfather leaned back and looked down his nose at Shihoru. Due to his advanced age, it felt like he might throw out his back if he wasn't careful doing that, but he could still stand tall if he tried.

Also, despite being over a hundred, Grandfather was tall. He had to be over 180 centimeters. He must have shrunk somewhat, too, so he'd have been even taller in his youth. It wasn't easy to see at first glance because of his stark white beard and eyebrows, but his skin was glossy, too.

He had an incredible sense of presence.

Shihoru felt suffocated. Her hands quaked. Grandfather was intimidating her.

"This chance doesn't come often, girly," Grandfather grinned. "Let's review your last lesson. Tell me the four types of elementals."

"The flaming Arve, the freezing Kanon, the electric Falz, and the shadowy Darsh."

"Correct. The Arve are like burning red flames."

When Grandfather said that and raised his right hand, surprisingly, a flaming elemental, an Arve, appeared on his palm.

"The Kanon are like snowflakes."

The mystery continued. The Arve vanished, and a Kanon appeared—or rather, to Shihoru's eyes, it appeared the Arve turned into a Kanon.

"The Falz are like lightning."

The Kanon turned into whirling electricity.

"The Darsh are like dark black masses of seaweed."

Finally, the electric discharge became a black ball.

"These are the four forms of elementals. Remember them well, girly. Elementals are everywhere. They appear to feed on the power of our spirits, our magical power, and through it exert their force."

"I-I know that. You've already taught me."

"You're a serious one, girly. Much like Yoruka. However, you mustn't imitate her. That one's too hard-headed. Yoruka's aware of that herself, but she can't

cast away her preconceptions. To be a mage, you must study as deeply as the depths of the land, yet also soar as high as the sky. Even knowing this, though, it is not easily done. Do you understand, girlie?”

“...Y-Yes.”

“Why do all mages learn Magic Missile as their first spell? That is the key. In a way, you’ve been given it from the start. Now it is up to you to put that key into the keyhole, turn it, undo the lock, and open the door.”

“The key...” Shihoru repeated.

“Indeed. Now, face me, and unleash a Magic Missile.”

“Marc...”

As if trying to suck them in, Shihoru drew elemental sigils with her staff as she chanted.

“...em Parc!”

Light gathered at the end of her staff, and formed a bead. The elemental had shown its form.

What elemental was this, though?

For an instant, that doubt crossed her mind, and then she launched the Magic Missile at Grandfather.

Grandfather faced the bead of light. The Darsh was still resting in the palm of his hand.

The bead of light and Darsh made contact. No—they... mixed?

They became one, and then became something else.

It was close to green in color, round, and had little arms and legs growing out of it.

It was unclear what it truly was, but it wobbled in Grandfather’s hand awhile, then, as if burning out, it blinked... and was gone.

“Girlie.” Grandfather sat down in his chair.

She couldn’t imagine it was just because he’d sat down, but Grandfather

suddenly looked much, much smaller.

“...No, Shihoru. You are a mage now. There is nothing left for me to teach you. The next time you come to the guild in search of training, I will entrust you to Wizard Yoruka. I’m too old for this. I want to spend what little time I have left on my research. You are the last disciple of Wizard Sarai.”

“Grandfather...”

“If you’d let me rub your boobs just a little, I would teach you again, though.”

“...No. I’ll have Wizard Yoruka teach me. I’ll be fine, thanks.”

“Hmm,” Grandfather said regretfully. “Is that so? What a shame.”

9. My Sweet Home

“How is it, Yume?” Master asked.

“Yeah, yeah! It feels super great!”

“O-Oh, yeah?”

“Fwahhhh... It’s all meltin’ away...”

“I-It’s just right, huh?”

“Sure is... Nnnngh... This’s unbelievable. Funyuhhhh...”

“I... I see.”

“Hawfuhhh...”

It felt so good, she didn’t know what was happening anymore.

The water temperature was perfect.

There was a bath in the hunters’ guild. It was designed so that you poured water into a stone basin, then lit a fire and heated it. Yume had helped draw the water, of course, but Master was the one who’d heated it up. In fact, he was outside the bath now, adjusting the level of the fire.

“Sorry, Master. Yume got in first... Normally, she feels like, normally, it should’ve been you who took the first bath. Bein’ the Master and all.”

“Y-You dummy,” Master said. “It’s fine. I’m not that big on baths and stuff like that, anyway. I just want to get clean and be done with it. But you, well, you’re, uh... a woman, after all.”

“Master, you’re nice,” Yume beamed.

“N-No, I’m not. No one’s ever told me that before.”

“That’s a mystery, then. Master, you’re so nice.”

“I-It’s not like I’d do this for just anyone...”

“Nuoh? Master, did you just say somethin’?”

“I did not! You’re hearing things.”

“Oh!” Yume closed her eyes. She relaxed. “Masterrrr?”

“Wh-What?”

“Yume, she...”

“Y-Yeah?”

“...she’s gettin’ sleepy.”

“Whooooa, y-you’re going to sleep?! Y-You’ll drown, you know?!”

“If it looks like Yume’s drownin’, Master, save her, would you?”

“I-I’ll save you! No, don’t make me save you, okay?!”

“Why not?”

“I-If I have to save you, that means I’d have to go in there, and if I do, you’re in the bath, so, uh, I’ll see you like that, and that’s really not good. I mean, I’m your father, no, that’s not it... H-Hey?! Yume?! You’re awake, right?!”

“Mewww. Yume’s awake.”

“...Y-You are? Good. How’s the water? It’s not lukewarm, right?”

“It may’ve gotten a teeeeny bit hotter.”

“You sure you haven’t been in there too long? Maybe it’s time you got out.”

“No way.”

“You’ll boil your brains!”

“But still!”

“What?”

“Once Yume gets out of the bath, it’s over, right?”

“Wh-What is?”

“Her basic training with Master.”

“What’s the problem with that?” he retorted. “It’s finally coming to an end!”

“Weren’t you enjoyin’ it, Master?”

“Um... er... enjoying it? Not me. This isn’t the time for fun and games. I’m your father, you know.”

“Oh, yeah? Well, Yume had fun. Oh, and though she’s not sure what it means, Yume’s becomin’ a volunteer soldier after this, right? A trainee.”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Yume wonders a little—just a little, mind—what’s gonna happen to her.”

“Well, it’s not strange for you to feel uneasy.”

“Not uneasy, exactly.”

“You’re not worried?” Master asked. “I was pretty worried. It was a long time ago, so I don’t fully remember, but I think I was.”

“Hmm. Which could it be? Yume, she doesn’t really know if she’s uneasy or not.”

“That’s so like you,” Master sighed.

“Oh, yeah? It’s like Yume?”

“That’s just what I think. We’ve been together seven days. I know you a little, at least.”

“Master, you’re tryin’ to understand Yume?”

“A-A little, okay? A little. Just a little...”

“Y’know, that makes Yume kinda happy. Yume, she can’t put things into words that well, though. She doesn’t remember anythin’ from before, after all.

But still, she was with you, doin' basic trainin', right? So, she's not sure what to say."

Yume pursed her lips. It was frustrating, not being able to put it into words. She wished a more suitable word would float up into her mind.

"Yume," Master put in.

"Huhwah? Whaaat, Master?"

"Come back anytime."

"Nuh...?"

"If anything happens. You're welcome to come back any time. I'm your father, after all. So, basically... you can think of me as a father figure. I'll be here for you."

"Ahhhhhh."

"...What?"

"Yume just got it. That's what it is. Master's Yume's home."

"Home..." he said softly.

"Is that wrong?"

"...No. If that's how you feel, that's fine. I'm like a house to you. If so, come back if you're in trouble."

"Yep. Yume'll do that."

"Also, so long as they have a mountain or forest, a hunter can survive."

"Yep, yep!" Yume said. "The White God Elhit-chan is there. And the animals. And lots of trees and grass. Oh, and Master, too!"

"...Yeah."

"Master?"

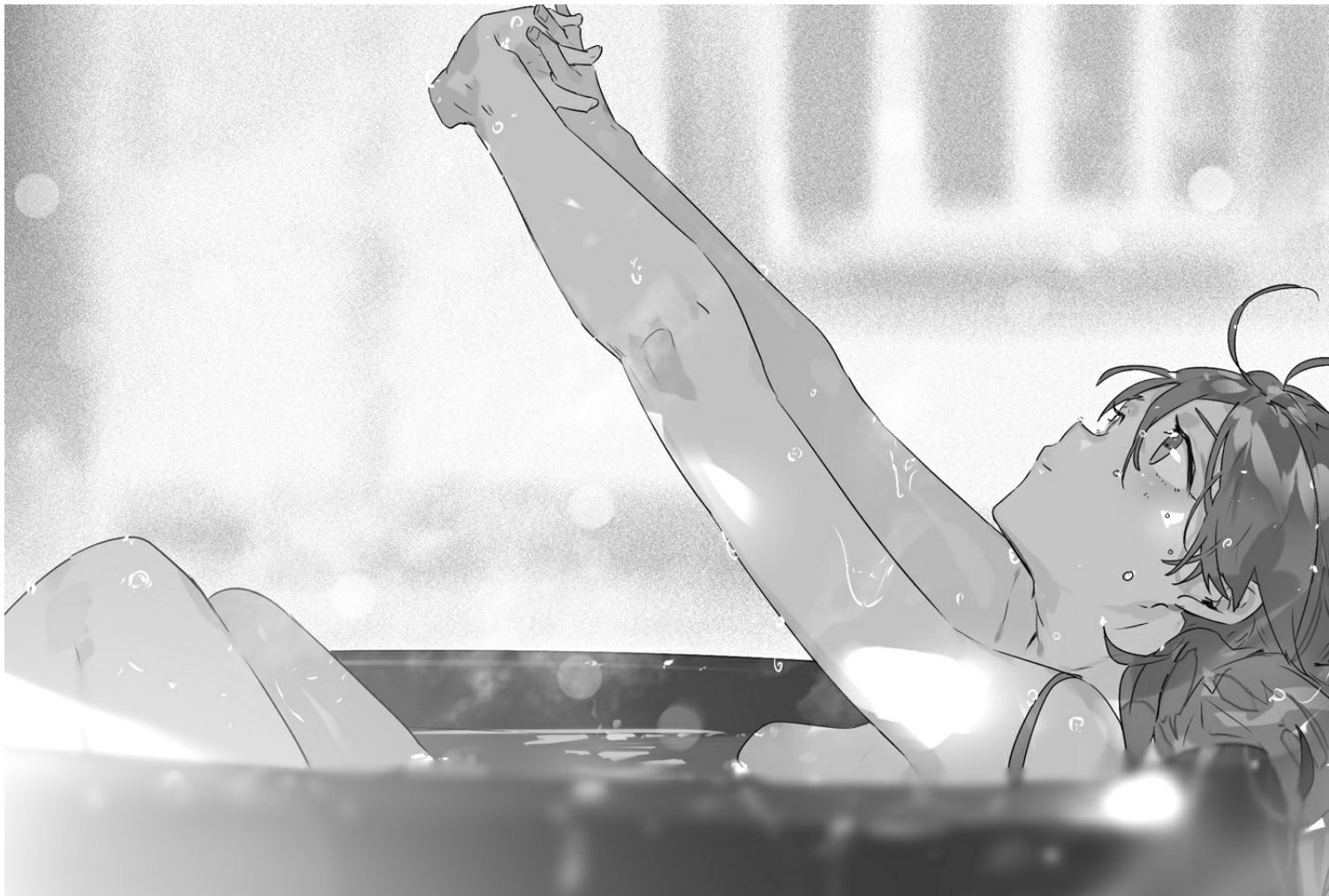
"Hm?"

"Yume, she's gonna become a great hunter."

"You're a bit hopeless with the bow, though." Master sounded like he was

smiling just a little. “But knowing you, you can do it. You’ll be a good hunter.”

“Hee hee!” Yume giggled. “Master, Yume loves you.”



10. The Two

With her basic training complete, Yume met back up with Ranta, Haruhiro, Shihoru, Manato, and things happened so fast.

She was surprised Ranta was a dread knight when he was supposed to have become a warrior, but Moguzo, who she thought had joined another party, popped back up, and they were able to recruit him, so the problem was solved.

The first day they were attacked by pit rats, and they had nothing to show for it, but thanks to Manato, they found a place to stay, and things were good.

In her bed in a pitch dark room, Yume whispered to herself, “Were they good?”

“Huh?” Shihoru, in the bed next to her, had apparently heard her. “Did you... say something?”

“Hmm... Did Yume?”

“Y-Yes.”

“Yeah. Yume did, huh?”

“Um...” That was all, and then Shihoru fell silent.

Yume was waiting for her to say more, but then she started getting tired and tired.

As she was drifting off, Shihoru opened her mouth. “U-Um... Yume? Are you asleep already?”

“Nuh uh. Not asleep yet.”

“You’re tired, huh?”

“A bit, yeah.”

“I... I’m sorry. G-Go to sleep. I won’t get in the way anymore...”

“Just now, Yume woke up, so it’s okay to talk, you know?”

“Erm... uh... it’s nothing... really... important, though.”

“Oh, yeah? You’re a hesitater, aren’t you?”

“H-Hesitater...? M-Maybe...”

“Yume, when she’s got somethin’ she wants to say, she tends to blurt it out.”

“I... I’m grateful for that, though. I, uh... I’m not so good at talking, so...”

“Oh, yeah? Well then, Yume and you’re gonna have looooots of chances to get closer, huh?”

“I-I’d... like that... I think. If you don’t mind... that is.”

“Yume doesn’t mind.”

“O-Oh, good. I was feeling u-uneasy... If Manato-kun hadn’t been there... who knows what would have happened?”

“Ohhh,” Yume said. “Manato, huh? He’s a quickie, and a fresher, too.”

“...He’s quick, and his personality’s refreshing?”

“Maybe that was it?”

“H-He’s so reliable, isn’t he?”

“Super reliable, yeah.”

“He’s a good guy. Really.”

“Hey... Shihoru?” Yume asked.

“Wh-What?”

“Listen, you mind if Yume sleeps with you?”

“Huh...?”

“You can say no if you don’t wanna. Yume, she’s feelin’ a bit lonely.”

“I-I don’t... mind?”

“Yippee!”

Yume immediately moved over, lying down next to Shihoru. Their hands happened to touch when she did, so she sort of held Shihoru’s hand.

Shihoru slowly gripped her hand back.

“Shihoruuu,” Yume said. “How was your trainin’?”

“W-Well... stuff happened, but it went okay. It was hard, though... I guess.”

“Oh, yeah?”

“What about you, Yume?”

“Um, well, Yume had loooooads of fun!”

“...Oh, I see. Good for you.”

“Yume’s master, he was so nice,” Yume said happily. “He taught her all sorts of things. He stayed with her the whole time. Oh, and the wolf-dogs were cute, too.”

“My teacher was... a grandpa, though.”

“Ohhh. Shihoru, you had a grandpa?”

“N-No, that’s not it... I mean an elderly person. He was over a hundred years old...”

“Over a hundred, huh? That’s super old, right?”

“But he was still, how should I put this...? A deviant.”

“A deviant, huh?”

“It means a weird person. He was a handful. He was a great man... and I learned a lot from him, but... I don’t know whether he can be trusted or not.”

“Shihoru, did you like that grandpa?”

“I don’t think I... hated him. He had a lot of bad points, but if you were to ask if hated him...”

“Well, then. It’s fine like that.”

“...Is it fine?”

“If you decide you wanna see that grandpa again, you should go see him. That’s what Yume thinks.”

“I’ll think about it.” Shihoru’s grip tightened. It was very warm.

By the time she thought she couldn’t fight the drowsiness any longer—Yume

had already fallen asleep.

appendix #1

Feelings of the Mask

Grimgar of
Fantasy and Ash

Level. Fourteen Plus

ATTN

1. Solitary

The man had no name.

Because he was alone. He had no need for a name.

The man had no face.

He wore a wooden mask. No one knew his true identity.

—Maybe.

“So... hungry...” he murmured.

It was a quiet night.

The masked man stood before a certain farm.

There was a farmhouse with a straw-thatched roof, a storehouse with a straw-thatched roof, and finally a barn that, you guessed it, had a straw-thatched roof. It was quite an impressive farmhouse. The farmhouse was large enough that two, maybe three, families could live there, and the fenced fields were quite wide.

“Okay... Guess I’m doing this.”

The masked man headed towards the barn. No, not just the barn, the great barn. Do barns not get called great? What would a great barn be?

Regardless, the moment the masked man put his hand on the door of that barn which was larger than the farmhouse, “Wow,” he whispered to himself.

It was not locked. Was it going to open? This whole area, it was nothing but farmhouses. Was this just some sleepy farming village, so they were careless? Or had they just forgotten to lock up?

He opened the door, doing his best not to make a sound.

When he entered, there was an animal stench. The man’s mask was handmade, and he had, of course, included mouth and nose holes. To survive using his five senses to their fullest, that was the wild masked man’s strong style.

The barn had windows, and they were open. Thanks to that, it wasn't pitch dark. The masked man's vision had been sharpened, and was decently good even at night. That let him move around the barn freely.

There were three of the cow-like ganaroes, and two small but sturdy horses. The ganaroes were one to a pen, while the horses were all together in one, but all the animals were keeping quiet.

There was also a pen where straw was laid out, or more like piled up, but no animals were visible inside.

What was this pen for? It was wide. Cows, maybe? There were more than ten, probably around twenty, sheep clustered together.

One of the horses whinnied, making its lips flap.

The masked man jumped, but he wasn't scared. Not at all. You think he'd get scared so easy? You moron.

The horses had their ears perked up and were looking towards the masked man. Though they were still cautious, they hadn't decided he was a suspicious individual. Foolish livestock. So docile and well-behaved.

The sheep caught his attention. But they were a little too big. The masked man went in deeper.

There was another low, wide pen. Birds. It was full of them.

The man crouched down, put his hand into the enclosure, and smiled a little beneath his mask.

"Dadehhoes, huh? They're nice and plump."

Their down was ash gray, and they resembled ducks. Flightless poultry. No, that wasn't quite it. The orcs clipped their wings, rendering them flightless. They sometimes crushed their throats, leaving them unable to squawk, too.

These dadehhoes were awfully quiet. They must have noticed the masked man, but they were clustering together and sitting still. These had to be squawkless dadehhoes.

"I'll help myself to one." The masked man reached into the pen. He tried to catch a dadehho.

At the last moment, his hand stopped short.

He stood up and turned around, gripping the hilt of the katana slung over his back with his right hand. He didn't draw it.

"...Was it my imagination? No..."

The masked man looked around the building.

From the pen that had nothing but straw piled in it—or so he had thought—there was a face sticking out.

What was it?

Human? No.

But probably not orc, either.

"Gumow, huh," the masked man muttered in a low voice.

The apparent gumow said, "Zugebeshy..." or something like that.

It was nonsense, of course. And wait, what was it doing here, anyway? This was a *livestock* barn. Did it live here? Happily, with all its livestock friends?

Well, maybe that wasn't impossible.

"Gumow" was a catch-all term for the offspring produced when an orc man forced a human woman or a woman of another race bear his children. Their position in society was low. To be blunt, they were discriminated against.

The masked man kept hold of the hilt of his katana with his right hand, raising the index finger of his left hand and bringing it to the mouth of his mask.

"Shh... You know what that means, right? Keep quiet. Got it?"

The gumow was frozen stiff. No reaction.

No... maybe it was thoroughly terrified, and couldn't respond?

The masked man clicked his tongue. "This is going nowhere..."

Hmm, or is it? It's fine—maybe? Yeah. Sure.

The masked man crouched down again. Out of caution, he didn't move his hand from the hilt of his weapon, and he reached inside the pen with his left.

The dadehho he grabbed by the throat let out a cry of, “Gweh!” The other dadehhos shuddered, or flapped their wings, raising a bit of a commotion.

The masked man ignored them, pulled in his target dadehho, and held it in his arms.

“Heh heh. Good boy.”

He was salivating. The man licked his lips beneath the mask as he moved away from there. He didn’t run. Because he wasn’t in a hurry. Easy peasy. This was a cinch for him.

The gumow was staring at the masked man and gulping inside the enclosure with the straw, but it was okay.

Don’t worry, okay? I won’t do a thing to you. The masked man tried to pass by the pen with with composure.

Then it happened.

On the other side of the same divider, there were another four? Five? Five of them. The five gumows all stuck their heads out in unison.

What, what, what, what? the masked man thought in alarm. *You’re popping out? I mean, you were there? If you’re there, say something. How am I supposed to know, otherwise?*

In the end, one of the gumows shouted, “Wagansakah!” in a shrill voice.

Ohh, now this was trouble.

“You mor... You... Aw, damn it...!”

He considered shouting, *Pipe down, you little shit!* to shut the thing up, but the other gumows started raising a fuss, too. The dadehho was thrashing around in the masked man’s arms.

Well, this just went to hell.

The masked man ran. *Whoosh*, like the wind.

As he flew out of the barn, a well-built orc was just coming out of the farmhouse.

“Gazza?! Waganda?!” the orc shouted.

The orc was bearing a long-handled farming implement that could have doubled as a weapon.

This looks dangerous. It doesn't get much more dangerous than this.

“Do I kill him...?!”

The masked man hesitated, but stopped, and turned around. He could've taken him, though. He could've, but if he killed every guy he could, the orcs'd go extinct, you know? The masked man was actually quite full of love, so he ran.

The orc ran after him shouting something in Orcish. When he glanced back, there were more orcs now. Not just two or three. Orcs bearing farming implements came out of the farmhouses one after another, while gumows poured out of the barns.

“What, it's a total offensive now?!”

The masked man jumped a fence, and went running through the wheat fields.

Hunger ate at him.

It was no big deal, though.

The red moon hung in the night sky overhead.

Where would the masked man go?



2. Mercy

The man had no name.

Because he was alone. He had no need for a name.

The sun had long since risen.

The man laid his mask of anonymity at his feet as he sat before a campfire.

He'd shaken his pursuers and crossed a mountain, so he had to be safe now. Still, though, he hadn't let his guard down. That was the etiquette of a lone man.

"...Is it etiquette, though?" he murmured.

The man cocked his head to the side. He had the feeling that was wrong somehow, but whatever. He didn't sweat the details. That was the etiquette of a mature man with tons of composure.

The meat and organs of the dadehho he had butchered were cooking over the fire, and the fragrant smell was whetting his appetite.

"It's about ready," he told himself. "No... a bit longer, huh."

He could never get enough of this time.

However, he could never catch a break. It was times like this that things were most prone to go awry.

"Honestly, what a pain," he muttered irritably.

Even as he did, the man's lips were smiling. In all things, composure was vital, after all.

The man masked himself, and grasped his katana. He didn't need to search long.

In the bushes, seven, maybe eight meters from the masked man, something, or rather some humanoid creature, was looking towards him.

It was crouching down, but more than that, it was small. Probably not an orc. A gumow, huh? Probably a kid, too.

“Come out!” the masked man called.

But there was no response. It was trembling. Was it afraid? Even a gumow child must have understood the masked man’s true power, and the threat he represented.

Nah, maybe not.

The masked man laid his katana on the ground, and raised his hands.

“Look. I’m not gonna kill you. Okay? Now get out here, or get lost, take your pick. Decide fast. If the meat burns, even a mellow guy like me is gonna snap. Seriously.”

Soon the gumow kid crawled out of the bushes. It didn’t approach the masked man. It stayed about three meters from the fire, cowering in uncertainty.

Well, whatever. Not my problem.

While this was happening, the dadehho was now ready to eat. The masked man shifted his mask, sinking his teeth into the fatty thigh meat.

“Oh, hoh...”

The deliciousness rang through his head, and it was dizzying.

“It’s not easy catching wildfowl and deer and whatnot around here. Maybe the orcs’ve hunted them all to extinction. Those guys don’t know the meaning of the word restraint... But, wow, this is good. Seriously.”

The gumow kid was staring at the man.

Judging by its height, it wasn’t even ten years old. It wore threadbare, filthy clothes made with rough material. It was barefoot, too. Its skin was closer to purple than green, but it was hard to put words to the color. It was emaciated, its limbs little more than sticks.

The gumow kid was holding its stomach pitifully. It had been holding its stomach all this time. It wasn’t the masked man it was looking at right now, it was the dadehho thigh, it seemed.

“I’m gonna tell you now,” the masked man snarled. “You aren’t getting any.”

The masked man polished off the rest of the thigh, and threw away the stick

he'd been using as a skewer.

The kid looked hungrily at the stick that was moist with fat.

"...What? Oh, fine."

The masked man gave the gumow kid a wing. He was, after all, a man overflowing with love, so he did things like this from time to time.

"Hold on..." the masked man said, alarmed.

The wrinkled face of the gumow kid that was tearing into the wing he'd given it showed no signs of intelligence. It was an animal. An ugly one, too.

If someone got used to seeing orcs, they might start thinking orcs looked tough and cool, but these guys who bore their blood were scrawny. Their cheekbones stuck out in funny ways, their foreheads were sloped, and their chins were tiny.

"Man, you guys're ugly..." With a smirk, the masked man went back to eating.

There was another thigh. Then there was the breast, another wing, the neck, and the organs.

The gumow kid quickly finished the wing, licking the stick, and turning a passionate set of eyes on the masked man.

"You moron. That's all you're getting. I'm starving here, too, and this is the first decent food I've gotten my hands on in a while."

He didn't think the gumow kid understood his words, but it slumped its shoulders.

The masked man bit into a thigh, then clicked his tongue. "Okay, first off, kid or not, you've gotta be able to do something yourself. If you can't, just quietly wait to be embraced by Skullhell. That's the way of the world. This is the last time, okay? It's seriously over, all right? Which one...?"

After careful consideration, he chose the gizzard. This was love. Yes, love.

"Here. Eat."

When it took the gizzard from the masked man, the gumow kid let out a cry of glee that was close to a scream.

“If only your voices were a little cuter. Then maybe even you guys’d stand a chance...”

The gumow kid, of course, was hardly listening. It gobbled up the wing quickly, but the gizzard it carefully, carefully, nibbled away at a little at a time.

“Heh...” The masked man chuckled. “Now, the rest is mine...”

He wanted to focus on eating, but even though he enjoyed the dadehho, he never really got lost in it. Ever alert and ready to respond, observing everything around him, and keeping his ears perked up, it was all second nature to him.

Looking at the gumow kid that was nibbling away like a mouse, using its front teeth, at a gizzard that was now only about the size of the tip of his pinky finger, he took note of its wrists, ankles, and neck. The kid must’ve been tied up. The masked man noticed the marks left by those bonds.

“Where’d you come from?” he asked.

The gumow kid looked at the masked man for a moment, but that was all. There was no answer. There was no way it could answer, huh.

“I guess you can’t understand me, yeah. You’re a serf... No, a slave? I’m gonna guess your kind master didn’t decide to set you free. Pretty sure you escaped... which means they’ll be coming after you, doesn’t it?”

The masked man grabbed his katana and stood up.

The gumow kid cowered.

Dogs.

There were dogs barking.

Yip, yip, yip, yip!

The masked man looked to his campfire. Rather than put it out, he was better off getting out of here.

When he grabbed the gumow kid’s arm and pulled, it meekly got to its feet.

“We’re going,” the masked man snapped.

The crispy dadehho neck skewer was still left. He pulled it off the stick, gave it to the gumow kid, and they took off.

The gumow kid followed after the masked man, neck meat held in its mouth. It had to be desperate. It wasn't fast, but it wasn't that slow, either. Maybe it was malnourished and underdeveloped as a result, and not actually as young as it looked.

The barking of dogs was chasing after them. He wanted to lose them, but they were closing in.

"Looks like we aren't gonna be winning a race with these pups...!" The masked man came to a sudden stop, and pushed the gumow kid away. He immediately drew his katana.

A dog sprang out from between a gap in the trees. Its matted fur was black, mixed with gray and brown spots. It was the breed orcs often kept as hunting dogs—an orc dog, if you will.

The orc dog didn't attack. It just barked like crazy. It was telling its master where his quarry was.

"Personal Skill, Lightning..."

The masked man jumped first to the right, then forward. Then finally, left.

Moving in the shape of a square bracket at high speed, with a flash of his sword, he decapitated the orc dog.

"Fast-strike! ...Damn. I'm so cool."

While he was singing his own praises, an arrow flew in. Not just one, though. Two. No, three.

"Personal Skill, Eclipse!"

The masked man slid straight to the side, swinging his katana, and cut down two of the arrows.

He only missed one. Or rather, that one had been off the mark to begin with.

"Gauh!"

There was a voice from behind him.

The gumow kid was doubled over.

The arrow. It had hit it.

Tough luck, was all the masked man could say.

Its chest. The arrow had struck the gumow kid in the chest.

The masked man was about to rush over to the gumow kid—

No, I can't. They're coming.

Again! Three more arrows!

“Personal Skill... Cured Mackerel?!”

It was a name he came up with on the fly. The man's sword happened to draw a 鰯, the first character of *shime saba*, cured mackerel.

He brilliantly knocked down all three arrows, then looked in the direction from which they had come.

Orcs. With blue hair. Three of them, bows at the ready.

“*Comeisme!*” In the language used by the undead, the masked man dared the orcs to come at him.

Orcish was still gibberish to him, but the Undead language he had at least some limited command of. More than a small number of orcs spoke Undead.

The orcs were nocking arrows. The masked man charged in at top speed.

“Personal Skill, Blinking Heaven!” The masked man appeared and vanished, vanished and reappeared.

Obviously he wasn't actually vanishing, or suddenly appearing out of nowhere. He was deliberately moving in the opposite of the direction he faced, and making deliberately unnatural double motions to make it look that way, along with making use of the trees. It created the illusion that he was appearing and disappearing, making this a genuine skill.

“*Dansuda, nnbode?!!*” The orcs were flustered, and didn't loose their arrows.

“Personal Skill...”

The masked man closed on the orcs.

“...Killing Field!”

He cut off the first orc's arm, then immediately snatched the orc's sword with

his left hand. The orcs always carried a secondary weapon, a short, curved sword.

He cut the second orc to pieces with his katana and the first orc's short sword. Then, without missing a beat, he threw the orcish short sword at the third orc.

The orcish short sword buried itself in the third one's forehead with a *stab!*

Now to finish up, there was only the half-lucid first orc who was missing an arm. If the orc was just standing there in a daze, it was no more a threat to him than any of the trees.

The masked man let the tension out of his shoulders, then gently decapitated the orc.

"Hmph. You're not terribly skilled. Just a bunch of thugs hired by the farmers, huh...?"

The masked man swung his katana to wipe the blood from it before sheathing the blade, then quickly rifled through the orcs' possessions.

Nine of the copper coins used as currency between the orcs and undead. Otherwise, nothing but junk.

When he got back to the gumow kid, it was trying to pull the arrow out of its chest.

"You idi— Stop that!"

He tried to stop it, but it was too late. The gumow kid pulled the arrow out, and the wound began spurting blood.

"Ow! Oah?!" The gumow kid wasn't reacting in pain so much as shocked panic.

"Calm down!" The masked man tore a strip off the tattered cloak he wore.

It would have been better if he'd had clean cloth, but this would have to do.

He pressed the strip from his cloak against the gumow kid's wound. It turned a deep red as he watched.

"Hold that there. You understand? *Hold on here. 'Kay?*"

Seeing the gumow kid nod, the masked man pulled a leather pouch from the

bag slung over his shoulder. The pouch contained a number of medicinal herbs. He ground one up with his hands, and a refreshing, but slightly bitter, smell spread out.

“This is medicine. Me-di-cine. *Medosun*.”

“...*Saraza*?”

“I dunno, but, yeah, probably that. It’ll staunch the bleeding. *Stop, blood. ‘Kay?* I’m putting it on.”

The masked man mercilessly applied the crushed herb to the gumow kid’s open wound.

The gumow kid groaned and writhed, but somehow managed to take it.

“It hurts, huh?” the masked man said. “Well, suck it up. *Stand pain. ‘Kay?*”

“...*Aye*.”

The gumow kid had to be used to bearing pain. It might not be true for all of them, but if you were born and grew up as a gumow, you didn’t have any other choice.

The man tore more strips off his cloak. He covered the wound he had rubbed medicine into with a strip, and then wrapped another strip over top of it. He tied a knot to make sure it wouldn’t come undone.

“Okay. That looks more or less good. Can’t stay here forever, though. There’re probably more of them coming... Dammit. Guess I’ve got no choice.”

The masked man moved his katana and bag from his back to his front, and knelt down in front of the gumow kid.

“Hey, get on. *Ride, back, me*.”

The gumow kid was clearly hesitant.

“Hurry it up. *Hey, hurryap!*”

When he loudly encouraged it a few times, the gumow kid finally got on the masked man’s back.

“Why am I doing this...?” the masked man muttered.

Even as he did, he kept running.

The gumow kid had to be in a ton of pain, but it clung tightly to the masked man's back. It wasn't heavy. If anything, it was light.

Okay, that was a lie. Yeah, it was heavy, okay?

"What am I doing...?" The masked man felt a laugh welling up.

He wanted to shout out loud.

What am I doing here?! Seriously, seriously, seriously!

He wouldn't shout, of course. The masked man was no fool.

"Am I being true to my own heart...?"

He thought hard about that.

Soon, he found his answer. Then the masked man nodded.

"Well, then there's no problem."

3. Name

That man had no name.

No face.

None knew the true identity that lay beneath his wood-carved mask.

Some believed there might be none. Probably. I mean, hey, why not? What do you think?

The masked man stripped off his shoes and stood in the middle of a river.

Not a big river. A stream. It could have been because of the recent lack of rain, but the water was only up to the masked man's waist, and the current was relatively mild.

The masked man just stood there, like a piece of caught driftwood or something.

These were things he was not thinking:

Why?

Am I becoming one with nature?

Is this natural?

Instead, his head was close to empty.

Nearly free of worldly thoughts.

Suddenly, he moved.

The masked man crouched slightly, sticking his right hand into the water.

Effortlessly, he snatched a fish.

With his left hand, he caught another.

“Personal Skill, Godhand... Or whatever.”

The man let out a loud, victorious laugh, then got up out of the river.

The man who had been in a state free from worldly thought mere moments ago was nowhere to be seen, but in a way you could say he was one with nature. Maybe, I guess?

The gumow kid was sitting by the river bank. Its pallor was, well, it was hard to say if it was good or bad. The color of its skin being what it was, it wasn't clear. It probably wasn't good, though.

The gumow kid's shoulders were heaving, and it was oozing greasy sweat.

The masked man chucked the two fish somewhere, then started on a campfire. “This place was a real find, huh? Those orcs, they hunt the beasts and fish without restraint. That's not ecological. That's egotistical. It's ego, not eco... hey, that was clever, if I do say so myself! I've got to hand it to me. Well, they do say they were pushed by the human forces into the Nehi Desert, the Plateau of Falling Ash, the Plains of Mold, and some other wastelands. Guess that forced them to catch whatever they could catch, whenever they could catch it, and however much they could catch. See, I get that. I can understand the feeling, at least.”

The gumow kid was silent. It was shivering like crazy. It seemed to be all it could do to withstand the pain.

The masked man started the fire, stabbed the fish onto skewers, and

retrieved the salt from his bag.

“Ta-dah! You can only really get this stuff in towns. I keep it for special occasions.”

With a generous sprinkling of salt on each fish, he started by cooking the outside of them close to the fire. Once the skin fully dried out, it was just a matter of feeding the fire kindling and waiting.

Once the fish stopped dripping moisture, it was safe to think they were done.

The man shifted his mask aside, and chomped into a well-cooked fish.

“Whoa! This is... good!”

The steaming-hot meat was wonderful. The bitterness of the innards lent it a certain spice. Then there was the salt.

Here, I would like to take a moment to profess my belief in the supremacy of salt. The whole world must bow before salt. Salt is our savior. In other words, the flavor of salt is almighty. Whether you do or don't have that salty flavor changes everything.

The masked man offered the second fish to the gumow kid. “Hey.”

The gumow kid stared at the fried fish, simply shaking its head weakly.

“Just eat it already.” The masked man forced the stick upon which the fried fish was skewered into the gumow kid's hand.

The gumow kid nibbled the fried fish just a little. Its sweaty face broke into a smile. “...Goo.”

“Isn't it, though? Eat it all. That's your share.”

The masked man greedily devoured his own fish. Not just the skin and flesh; he snapped the bones between his teeth and swallowed them, too. The gumow kid was eating its fish one bite at a time, savoring it.

“We'll all be embraced by Skullhell someday,” the masked man said. “Today could be that day. But, still, if you can eat, eat. You've got to live until you die.”

In the end, over a long time, the gumow kid managed to polish off the whole fish.

The masked man patted the gumow kid on the head, and gave it a compliment. The gumow kid seemed happy, and even proud.

The masked man put the gumow kid on his back and started walking. Southward.

The masked man was heading south.

Where was this? He knew it was orc and undead territory, at least, but the masked man did not know his precise location.

There were more orcs. They occupied almost all of the cities. Only a very few were ruled by the undead.

Orcs were the ones living in the farming villages, too. The workers were mostly gumow slaves. They were whipped, day in and day out, and forcibly put to work. If the gumows had children, their children were enslaved, too. Slaves birthed more slaves, increasing their numbers. The gumow were no different from livestock.

“Human...?” the gumow kid whispered in the masked man’s ear.

The masked man thought a moment. “No,” he denied it. “I’m not human, but I’m not inhuman, either... I am me. No one but myself.”

“...Name?”

“You want to know my name?” The masked man adjusted how he was carrying the gumow kid. Somehow, it felt heavier. “Ranta.”

“...Rawnta.”

“Yeah. And you? What’s your name?”

“...Pat.”

“Pat.”

“Aye.”

“Hang in there, Pat,” said Ranta.

It felt like Pat nodded.

Ranta walked. He walked in silence.

Ranta had walked on his own feet all this time. He could walk anywhere. He could keep on walking.

He climbed a slope. Forged a path where there was none. He slid occasionally, and because he was carrying Pat on his back, he couldn't grasp on to the trees and grass.

Who cares? It's no big deal. I'll make it work. Climb. Climb. Keep on climbing.

Close to sunset, he reached the top of a small hill. It was an open space, and he could see far into the distance.

The river meandered. The setting sun made the surface of it shine. The mountains went on like crazy. The forest spread out in silence. That one place with smoke rising from it must have been a village.

"What do you think, Pat?" Ranta asked. "Quite the view, huh?"

There was no response.

Ranta laid Pat down on the ground.

Pat had long since stopped breathing.

"...Am I being true to my own heart?" Ranta whispered to himself over and over.

For whatever reason, he couldn't find an answer.

Was it a yes?

Or was it a no?

He didn't know. But why?

He knelt next to Pat, watching the moment the sun set.

The world blackened by the second.

The wind was cold.

The clouds in the sky blotted out the red moon.

Scattered raindrops fell, then it started to come down in earnest as he watched.

"Am I being true to my own heart?"

Ranta removed the mask and cast it aside. He stood up, and shouted out loud, not caring if his throat gave out.

“Yes! I’m being true to my heart! Pat!!”

He looked at Pat.

In the lashing rain, Pat didn’t stir in the slightest.

Pat was dead.

“O, Dark God Skullhell, please, take Pat into your arms. Everyone is equal under you, right?”

Ranta started to dig a hole with his bare hands. He never once rested. The thought of stopping never crossed his mind. He dug.

He kept digging.

He ignored the heavy rain, and expanded the hole.

Until the hole was perfect for Pat, he dug as if in a trance.

Ranta laid Pat in the bottom of the hole.

“Here’s a gift to take with you... because I don’t have anything else to offer.”

He laid the nine copper coins that he had seized from the orcs he’d killed on top of Pat’s chest.

He was well aware that he was being foolish. What did he mean, “a gift to take with you”? There was no afterlife. The dead went nowhere, and could take nothing with them.

While he was filling the hole in, dawn broke.

The rain had let up at some point.

Ranta picked up his mask.

He was alone, so he needed no name.

If no one knew who he was, he could be alone.

Ranta used a knife to dig another groove into the mask. The mask had to change. He didn’t need to engrave Pat’s name in it. He needed only to remember it.

Ranta put the mask back on, and began to walk again.

4. Alcohol

It was already early evening, but thanks to the hanging oil lamps and torches everywhere, the streets were as bright as day.

It was around the time when the men who had just finished their work in the mines would be heading out to town in search of wine, food, and women. A rowdy good time would be had by all.

No, it wasn't just the mines. This town had an ironworks, too. The ironworks was still in operation, and smoke rose from its chimneys, so the fires in the furnaces probably never went out. The day shift would leave at night, and the night shift would surely go out to drink in the morning.

This was a town that never slept.

Orcs, goblins, kobolds, undead, and more—the roads were filled with men from the minority races, and the area around the pubs and eateries was especially packed.

In one place, someone was singing cheerfully, and in another, two fools were fighting. There were people watching that scene with raucous laughter, too.

Ranta was not so innocent as to let this chaos overwhelm him.

That said, when he saw a furry giant that stood around three meters tall stomping along half-naked, yes, he was obviously surprised.

"Is that a troll?" Ranta muttered, astonished. "I've heard they exist way up north, in the Great Icefield, and the Iceleaf Forest."

Whatever the case, no one was paying attention to Ranta and his mask, so he was grateful for that. Of course, he'd boldly set foot in this town figuring he'd probably be all right. He was correct.

"But..."

Wasn't there anything that could be done about this smell? Their body odor was so strong that it made his eyes water, and combined with the harsh smell

of puke from the drunks and other excrement, it formed an incredible stench that filled the entire town.

“I’m sure I’ll just stop noticing it at some point,” he told himself.

A guy could get used to anything, after all.

He went down a somewhat wider road, and encountered a chain gang of gumows sitting along the roadside.

They were for sale. They likely existed to do the most dangerous jobs in this town, the ones no one else would do, no matter how well they were paid.

Some piece-of-shit, like that orc with his hair dyed in three colors, would buy them.

They were slaves.

They were bound by chains soaked with their blood, sweat, and tears, being led off to the place where they would be worked to death.

There were gumows among them who were no older than Pat.

“This is reality... huh?”

Ranta quickened his pace. He passed the line of slaves, and approached the orc with the tricolor hair.

The orc with the tricolor hair must have been pretty well off. As if to show off his wealth, he wore necklaces, earrings, bracelets, and all sorts of other jangling shiny golden trinkets. The bag around his waist was especially gaudily decorated, and it looked good and heavy.

“Personal Skill, Black Light,” Ranta murmured.

He passed by the orc with the tricolor hair. Beneath his mask, he smirked.

In his right hand, he held a wallet made of lizard skin. It wasn’t Ranta’s. With a move too fast for the eye to follow, he had pilfered it from the orc with the tricolor hair’s pouch.

“So long,” he said in a whisper, then entered an alley.

Checking the contents of the wallet in the darkness, there might not have been any gold coins, but there were five silver ones, and ten copper.

“Too easy. But that’s what happens when you’re me.”

The wallet itself would probably fetch a good price, but he had no desire to use it himself, and selling it off would be too much hassle. He discarded it in the alley, and went looking for a bar.

There was no shortage of places where it looked like he could get a stiff drink. Many stalls sold alcohol, and business was booming at all of them.

Ranta made a point of choosing the largest place he could find. It had an iridescent sign, the kind of thing orcs probably loved, and text written in the undead script, which looked like a mass of snakes had laid a large number of eggs. That was the place’s name, no doubt, but he couldn’t read it.

He pushed past some orcs who were shouting at one another by the entrance, and went inside.

It was a large establishment, with a high roof. Half of the first floor had an alcove that reached up to the ceiling, and there was a second and third floor, too.

Not every seat was full. The building was maybe at eighty or ninety percent of capacity, but it was still incredibly lively. It was so noisy, he could barely hear the multiracial band that was performing on the stage on the second floor.

The clientele were downing zwig, the green, foaming drink which was favored by the orcs, and dubrow, the milky, sour drink beloved by the undead, along with beer and distilled spirits, at an incredible pace.

Ranta held a copper coin between his thumb and forefinger, as if showing it off as he walked around the pub. He did this to prove he wasn’t penniless, and he had come here with money and the intent to drink. If he didn’t do something like that, then if the staff watched him closely, or if a rough customer picked a fight with him, he couldn’t object.

In one corner of the pub, there was a gray elf drinking. The table sat three, but he didn’t seem to have company. It looked like he was alone.

They were called gray elves because their white skin had an ashen tone to it. Their hair was silver, almost white, and their eyes were blood red. Their mouths were like simple slits. This one wore a mixture of pelts and chain mail, and he

had a large pile of luggage at his side. The fingers that held his mostly transparent glass bore many rings, and his talon-like nails had a luster like obsidian. He looked incredibly ominous.

Ranta sat across from the gray elf without hesitation, then put the copper coin on the table as if pushing it towards him.

The gray elf glared at him. Then again, his face was practically expressionless. He might just be looking at Ranta. Still, he was inscrutable.

After some time had passed, a small waiter came. *“Hey, hey, fatchoo doin’?”*

The waiter was a korrigan. They lived in the Plateau of Falling Ash, and their race was like humans shrunk down to half the size, with ash and rust rubbed into their skin for some reason. As far as Ranta knew, when they formed into groups, they could get uppity and cause mischief. They were noisy, ridiculous, easygoing guys.

Ranta pointed at the gray elf’s cup, then held up two fingers. *“This, two.”*

“Jyah?!” The korrigan waiter jumped up, and banged on the table repeatedly. *“Dahh, jen, johh!”*

Was he pissed, maybe?

Ranta laid out a second copper coin on the table. That still didn’t quell the korrigan’s anger.

“Dohh, dahh, johh, gihoa!”

He pulled a knife and swung it around, and looked ready to strike at any moment. Seriously?

Ranta kept putting copper coins on the table. At the eighth coin, the korrigan finally settled down. The waiter snatched up the copper coins, and skipped off humming.

“Four coppers apiece. Damn, that’s expensive stuff.” Ranta spoke in the human language despite himself.

The gray elf’s eyes narrowed. *You... You, yuma... human?”*

“What if I am?” Ranta asked.

“I... report you. Here and now. Raise voice... Everyone hear. What happen to you?”

“Try it.” Ranta put his elbows down on the table, weaving his fingers together. “You know what’ll happen, I bet.”

“You... die. Here. Get killed.”

“Maybe I do. But before that, gray elf, I’ll be taking you with me.”

“Tch, tch, tch, tch...” The gray elf’s shoulders shook with a creepy laugh. “Business... with me? Human.”

“I want to go south.”

“...South. To Oortahna, I see.”

“Yeah.”

“Why... come to me?”

“You’re a shaman, right? You must travel around. I know there are gray elves like you, at least.”

“I am... not cheap.”

“I’ll bet.”

“I not know you. I am... very expensive. It cost you.” The gray elf tapped his nails on his cup.

Without taking his eyes off the gray elf, Ranta read the room around him. He could feel them. Eyes. Multiple pairs of them, too.

His skin tingled. This sensation. It made his throat feel awfully dry.

The korrigan waiter brought two cups, and left them on the table.

“*Thanku*,” Ranta called out after the waiter, then hurriedly looked around.

There were at least two orcs looking his way. They weren’t dressed like the laborers, the slaves, or the modestly wealthy folks of this town. If anything, they were travelers like Ranta or the gray elf.

Ranta took his cup in hand. The cup was still half full of amber liquid. As befit its price, it looked like hard liquor.

“Looks like you’ve got your own situation,” Ranta said.

“Everyone does... until they die.”

“Well, yeah.”

“Wezelred,” said the grey elf, as if introducing himself.

“I’m Ranta, Wezelred. Mind if I call you Wezel?”

“*Kay, Ranta.* I leave here... this pub.”

It didn’t feel sudden.

“You do, and you’ll get attacked,” said Ranta immediately.

Wezel nodded. “Then, afterwards, I hear your story. How that?”

“Fine.” Ranta shifted his mask, and took a swig.

His dry throat burned with pain, and the smoky fragrance came out his mouth and nose.

His esophagus, and his stomach, they were hot.

He took a breath.

“You drink, too, Wezel. This one could be your last. Take your time, and enjoy it.”

Wezel smiled slightly, raised his cup, and took a sip.

5. Enemy

Ranta drank his spirits to the last drop, then left the pub.

He could see the back of Wezel, who had left the bar before him, off in the distance. The elf was carrying some awfully large luggage, but he seemed light on his feet, or at least his steps were smooth.

Two orcs had left the pub to go after Wezel, but Ranta didn’t see them now.

The mining town was filled with noise at night. The main streets were as congested as ever.

Ranta tailed Wezel at a distance.

It might not just be him; they could be watching Ranta, too. He was on his guard, but for the time being, he didn't think he was being followed.

Wezel took a right turn. Immediately after, one of the people on the street quickened their pace.

That orc's hair was a dull orange. He was suspicious.

The orange-haired orc turned the corner after the elf.

Ranta made a point of walking past the corner, rather than rounding it, and when he did, he spotted both Wezel and the orc.

Ranta turned right at the next corner, and started running. Then he took another right, and the moment he went into an alley, he heard a noise.

Wezel had fallen to the ground, and his things were scattered around. There were two orcs on the other side of him. The orange-haired orc from before, and another pink-haired orc.

The pink-haired orc had been in the pub.

"Personal skill..." Ranta laid his hand on the hilt of his katana, then instantly accelerated.

He leapt over Wezel.

The pink-haired orc was trying to clobber Wezel with some kind of fold-up club. It seemed he noticed Ranta, but by that time it was too late.

"Dazza?!" the orc shouted.

"...Time Flies Like a Dream."

Ranta effortlessly severed the pink-haired orc's head.

He wanted to say, *That's talent for you*, but the fact was, though there had been quite a difference in power between them, it was easy to do this when someone was caught off-guard.

The remaining orange-haired orc went for the two handaxe-like blades that hung at his waist.

"Gash!" the orc yelled.

“You wanna go?” Ranta grinned.

Orange-hair was only maybe 180 centimeters tall. He wasn’t that thick, either. He was a lightweight, as far as orcs went. He was dual-wielding axes, so he must have been the type that competed using speed and the number of moves he could employ.

Ranta unleashed a three-strike chain to test him, and Orange-hair deflected them all with his handaxes.

Ranta wasn’t going to start out underestimating the orc. He anticipated Orange-hair was a reasonably capable opponent. Those axes were dangerous. Plus, this was an orc, so he had more strength than appearances would suggest. Ranta couldn’t make light of those handaxes’ power.

He tried moving left, then right, to keep his opponent in check, but Orange-hair showed no sign of that movement disturbing him.

Ranta went for another swing, but it was deftly parried.

Orange-hair’s stance was low. He lowered his hips, bent his knees, and leaned forward. There was no wasted strength in his axe-wielding hands. He, like Ranta, was watching and waiting.

Orange-hair was cautious. Was he waiting for reinforcements? That seemed possible.

Guess I’ll hook him, Ranta decided in an instant, kicking backwards off the ground using his heels and the tips of his toes.

It was Exhaust.

As Ranta moved backwards as if he had been launched that way, Orange-hair charged in.

If Ranta had been in Orange-hair’s position, he’d have attacked now, too. That seemed to be the only option, the thing one ought to do, so Orange-hair did it. The orc’s choice was, by no means, a bad one.

However, it came half a second too late.

“O Darkness, O Lord of Vice.”

The true form of darkness, or perhaps malice made manifest, pooled in a horrifying miasma.

Then it formed a vortex.

“Dread Venom Wave.”

The miasma enveloped Orange-hair.

“Bugoh...?!” Alarmed, Orange-hair backed away, swinging his axes.

That wasn’t going to dispel Skullhell’s miasma.

The poisonous gas permeated Orange-hair through every orifice in his body—no, even through his skin.

“Nnnnguh...!” Orange-hair’s whole body shuddered, and he foamed at the mouth.

That’s gotta be tough. Let me give you a hand. Ranta leapt over Wezel to strike at Orange-hair again.

He meant to settle this right away and put the orc out of his misery, but it looked like the orc was going to be stubborn a while longer.

Orange-hair used both handaxes to parry Ranta’s katana.

Dread Venom Wave was Ranta’s own original Dread Magic spell, made by forcibly combining Dread Venom and Dread Wave. It robbed the target of their life force, and enervated them as if they were suffering from a high fever.

Orange-hair had to be having a pretty hard time, but he wasn’t giving in.

“Glad to see it,” Ranta grunted. “—But still!”

He suddenly planted a front kick in Orange-hair’s gut. It hit him in the solar plexus, and even the orc had to go down after that.

“O Darkness, O Lord of Vice.” Ranta gripped his right wrist with his left hand. “Dread Aura.”

This rising miasma, was it an unending malice, a premonition of destruction? He accepted it with his whole being, and it made him seethe. He was seething.

This is the will of Skullhell. The Dark God commands me to kill.

Bring death. Death. Death. Death. Death. Death. Death. Death. Death. Death. Death.

Unmistakable death. Nothing but death.

The overwhelming urge to kill activated every cell in his body, and that wasn't really a contradiction. Life was connected to death. Life and death were laws.

"Secret Art—"

I am the bringer of death.

Ranta charged in with Leap Out, thrusting his katana.

Orange-hair was still struggling, and must have tried to twist out of the way. If he weren't being violated by Dread Venom Wave, he might well have managed to dodge.

Instead, the katana plunged mercilessly through his throat.

There was an unmistakable end of life, a sensation of death, there.

"Blossoming of the Gaudy Flower." As Ranta pulled his katana free, he pushed Orange-hair away.

Orange-hair was entirely dead. The dead could resist nothing, and when pushed away, the orc merely crumpled.

Wezel was sitting cross-legged on the ground. He had a knife in his hand. At first glance, it looked like the sort of thing you might give to a woman or child for self-defense, but it was nothing so cute. That blade contained a demonic glow, and it had sucked a terrifying amount of blood. It must have harbored some special power.

He was a creepy gray elf. He might have managed to handle his pursuers alone, without Ranta's aid. If so, why had he made Ranta get his hands dirty? He had some ulterior motive here. Was that what it meant?

"So, why are they after you?" Ranta questioned.

"...You do not need to know."

"Well, not like it matters." Ranta laughed it off, then sheathed his katana.

It was a given that the gray elf had ulterior motives. Everyone had things they

were carrying. At times, they couldn't hold onto them, and they spilled out. And once they dropped them, it was all too common to be unable to get them back.

Wezel put away his knife, and began gathering up his scattered luggage.

"I, too, have business in the south," he said.

Ranta helped out. "Oh, yeah?"

"There is a place I must go."

"In other words, you and I could travel together, huh?" Ranta asked.

"If you wish it... yes."

Ranta stopped and asked himself: *Am I being true to my own heart?*

The answer was clear.

Yes, I am.

"Do you think there's any reason I wouldn't?" Ranta offered Wezel his right hand. "This should be a fun trip, Wezel."

"Tch, tch, tch..."

Wezel's shoulders simply heaved with ominous laughter, and he made no attempt to take Ranta's hand.

6. Good

The red moon looked down as if laughing at them.

Wezel headed west and further west.

Ranta followed behind him, keeping a watchful eye on their surroundings as he walked.

It was dawn in the forest. He couldn't even see his feet. Not that this scared him. Doing dangerous things was, well, dangerous. Even Ranta would, just occasionally, trip, or step on something weird and think, *Ew*. Creepy was creepy, you know? But still.

Wezel walked without hesitation, as though he could see clearly. That was strange, no matter how you looked at it.

“Hey,” Ranta put in.

“...What?”

“I’ve been wondering. Do you gray elves have good night vision?”

“Tch, tch, tch, tch...” Wezel had a good laugh, then stopped and beckoned Ranta.

It felt like he might stab Ranta if he carelessly wandered over, but if the elf was gonna do that, then so be it.

I’d cut him up before he could stab me. I mean, seriously, killing him’d be easy.

When Ranta walked over, Wezel spread both arms upwards, narrowing his eyes and breathing deeply.

His red pupils sparkled ominously. Like his eyes were shining. Did it just look like that? No, no matter how many times he checked, they really were shining.

“Ruwintimroti... Ruwingwinbodoichiewiris...”

It was a low voice, different from when he talked, far too low.

Was he chanting a spell?

“Yeruwifi...” Wezel continued. “Imatebuimugaruwado...
Tiwiyesuburidirevad... Igolusingweldinoswun...”

Suddenly, Ranta heard another whisper, separate from Wezel’s chanting.

What was this?

There were many whispers, going back and forth, not in any particular language—but something was strange.

Ranta tried plugging his ears.

I knew it, he reflected. He could still hear them. Why could he still hear them?

“Is this... what shamans do?” Ranta asked hesitantly.

Wezel pointed both hands at him.

“Whoa!” Ranta’s threw his head back involuntarily.

He didn’t know what it was. It might have had no form, no mass, but

something—that was all he could call it—*something* had come at him.

Not just come at him, but come inside him.

It flowed in, racing around his body.

“Hah?!” Ranta shouted.

Suddenly, his eyes brightened.

“It’s bright...!”

He felt like the glare of the sun was shining straight into his eyes.

Ranta blinked. Nothing changed. It was still bright.

“This is... incredible,” he said, awed.

“It is Mooncraft,” said Wezel. “The most basic kind.”

“If you had this kind of convenient magic, you could’ve cast it on me sooner,” Ranta griped.

“It is not magic.”

“It’s close enough.”

“It is different. Completely different. They are similar, but not.”

Wezel started walking. His eyes must have been shining because of his shaman technique. If so, were Ranta’s eyes shining now, too?

Walking through the forest that seemed as bright as midday, Ranta realized it wasn’t always bright. It seemed that when the moon was behind the clouds, it got dark.

“Mooncraft, huh,” Ranta murmured. “I get it now.”

That aside, though, Wezel had strong legs. When they were resting, he didn’t lie down, just sat, and once they started walking again, he wouldn’t rest for quite a while.

Ranta had confidence in his own stamina, but he was in awe of Wezel’s toughness. Still, though, no matter what, he wouldn’t say, *Uh, hey, I’m pooped. This’s tough. Let’s rest.*

“Hold on,” Ranta said suddenly. “Weren’t we going south...?”

He had gotten sick of suffering in silence, so he'd just muttered that to himself, but Wezel actually engaged with him for once.

"You came from... where?" the gray elf asked.

"Thousand Valley."

"South of there... the Nargia Highlands... did you cross them?"

"Nah. The security there was crazy tight, so I wasn't getting through there."

"...I'll bet."

"I went back and forth, wandering for over a year—going through the mountains, and stuff. I saw the Nehi Desert, too. Didn't set foot in there, though, obviously."

"Wise."

"In the end... Let's see, today would be the 1,113th day, so it's been three years and change, huh."

"South of here is..." Wezel looked towards the south for an instant. "...Lake Gandah. On the shore of that lake is what was once the city of Arabakia... Rodekia."

"I know the name, but that's it," Ranta said. "It's not Rodekia anymore, right?"

"Grozdendahl. It is a major base for the forces of the alliance."

"The alliance—Wait, you don't mean... the Alliance of Kings?"

"Tch, tch, tch..." Wezel's shoulders heaved with laughter, but he gave no answer.

"The Alliance of Kings is gone now, isn't it?" Ranta said slowly. "So why...?"

Long ago, the No-Life King had supported orcish, goblin, kobold, and gray elf kings, urged them to cooperate, and together they'd formed the Alliance of Kings.

The Alliance of Kings had destroyed human kingdoms like Ishmar, Nananka, and Arabakia one after another, and then, at the strong request of the orcish king and others, the No-Life King had become the emperor, establishing the

Undying Empire.

However, when the No-Life King, who was supposed to be undying, had died, the situation had changed completely.

With no emperor appearing to succeed him, the Undying Empire had fallen into pieces. With the alliance fractured, the undead race created by the No-Life King now held power in the former lands of Ishmar, and the orcs were in the former lands of Nananka. Meanwhile, the comparatively weaker goblins had put down roots in Damuro, while the kobolds set up a base in the Cyrene Mines.

That was the human understanding of the situation, at least.

But it had been a long time since Ranta's departure from Alterna. The situation might have changed by now.

There was something about this that bugged him, or rather, something he remembered.

Soma had said there were signs indicating the revival of the No-Life King, and he'd established the Day Breakers to infiltrate Undead DC in the former domain of the Kingdom of Ishmar.

Ranta was, technically, a member of the Day Breakers, but he hadn't been particularly close to Soma or any of the others. He hadn't been given any detailed information, and it was unclear whether there were actually any signs warning of his return or not. Still, he didn't think Soma was bluffing. Soma didn't feel like the kind of guy who would do something that underhanded.

So the man had most likely found something out.

And, the fact was, the Alliance of Kings was on the move.

"Hey, Wezel," Ranta spoke up. "What's in Undead DC?"

"Ishidua Rohro. It is the home of King Ishi, the king of the undead."

"Ishidua? Sounds familiar."

"If so... that is not surprising."

"Is he famous or something?" Ranta asked.

“King Ishi... was the prince of Arabakia.”

“Uh...?”

“He received the blood of the No-Life King... turning him into an undead. He was... a loyal vassal. The No-Life King’s closest associates... were the Five Princes. He was one of them.”

“Hold on...” Ranta said slowly. “Just wait. Humans are given blood? And they become undead?”

“To give their own blood, and create undead... is something that only the No-Life King, and the Five Princes... were said to do.”

“So, if the term’s Five Princes, that means there are four more of those guys?”

“The Grand Prince of Igor, Deres Pain,” Wezel said. “The double arm progenitor, Gyabigo the Dragon Hunter.”

“Double arm... Wait!”

The undead in Forgan, the four-armed Arnold. He’d been a double arm, too.

If Gyabigo was the progenitor, did that mean he’d been the first double arm? That Dragon Hunter nickname probably wasn’t just for show, either. He probably *had* killed a dragon.

“And the other two?” Ranta asked slowly.

“The wielder of the original magic, Architekra. And Ainrand Leslie. Leslie’s whereabouts are unknown.”

“Ainrand... Leslie... Hey, is that Ainrand Leslie of the Leslie Camp?”

“On our side, he is also called Kidnap Leslie... Leslie the Kidnapper. In forests and wastelands, his home suddenly appears. You must never approach. Those invited in... never return.”

“I’ve heard stories along those lines myself, too,” Ranta nodded. “So Ainrand Leslie is an undead big shot? Seriously...?” Ranta sighed. “We really don’t know anything, do we?”

“You people, humans, are... insects here in Grimgar. Poisonous insects. Vermin. You were exterminated, driven to the frontier... and yet you returned.”

Originally this land humans called the frontier had been the mainland of Grimgar.

The remnants of Arabakia's forces and its people had been chased away by the forces of the Alliance of Kings, escaping to the south of the Tenryu Mountains.

That area had been undeveloped land, blocked off by the Tenryu Mountains and the dragons. That was the true frontier.

But humans didn't want to acknowledge that they had been driven from the center of civilization. So they had started to call the wild lands that had been frontier land in the south "the mainland."

Basically, the reason humans called this land "the frontier" was out of bruised pride.

Wezel kept walking in silence.

By the time the sky brightened, the effects of Mooncraft had faded.

The two of them stopped by a mountain village. There were about twenty or so shacks clustered together in between the mountains. It was an insignificant thorp.

One orc stood in their way. He had a curved blade hanging at his waist. His messy hair was not dyed. He was tall, and well-built, but his left leg was a prosthetic made with a mix of metal and wood. On top of that, he was blind in both eyes, as if they had been gouged out.

"Ahyeah! Wezelred!" The orc called out to Wezel without drawing his blade.

He was clearly blind, but apparently he could see them somehow.

Wezel approached the orc. "Mugoh Sugedd. Lontai nosee."

They greeted one another by bumping fists. The orc's name was Mugoh, and the two were apparently acquainted.

There was a flat rock in the middle of the village, and a well was dug next to it. Mugoh, Wezel, and Ranta sat down together on the rock.

For acquaintances, Mugoh and Wezel didn't talk much. They seemed to just

be relaxing. Maybe they were closer than passing acquaintances, and they could feel at ease when they were together.

The villagers gradually gathered around, and they stared at Ranta from a distance. Many of them were orcs, but there were a number of undead, too. There were also a few gumows, not many. They were all dressed in shabby clothes.

The surprising thing was that the orcs, the undead, and the gumows were all equal in their poverty. As far as he could see, these gumows weren't being treated as slaves.

"What kind of village is this?" Ranta asked.

After a short time, Wezel spoke. "Those who absolutely reject fighting... exist, too. But it is seen as... cowardice."

"So this is a village of hermits, or something?"

"Tch, tch, tch..." Wezel's shoulders heaved with laughter. "Mugoh, and his fellows... live here. That is all."

"Well, we all have our own ways to live," Ranta shrugged.

"And our own ways to die... Yes."

One little orc who must have been a child hesitantly approached. He was asking Wezel something in Orcish.

Wezel stood up. It looked like they were going somewhere, and the orc kid was leading the way.

There wasn't anything for Ranta to do, staying put here all alone. So he decided to tag along.

The two went to a hovel. It was a home made with pillars standing in the ground, surrounded by mud walls, and a simple thatch roof. Still, it had been constructed carefully, and the floor was covered in straw mats.

In a sleeping spot where straw had been piled on top of the mats, there was a single orc lying on his side. Unlike the orc that led them here, this one was no child. He was an adult.

He was constantly coughing, and seemed to be having an awfully rough time. He must have been weakened with sickness. He was emaciated.

Wezel knelt next to that orc.

The orc let out an intense cough, and hacked up something dark black. It wasn't so much blood as bloody phlegm.

The kid was constantly rubbing the older orc's back, but he wouldn't stop coughing.

The orc finally shoved the kid away, as if to say, *Enough. Stop it.* Even that gesture was weak.

Wezel gave an order to the kid in Orcish.

The orc kid seemed to accept it, and he moved away from the adult orc, then sat down in the corner of the little house.

Making sure that he had, Wezel leaned in close to the adult orc's ear to ask something.

The orc coughed, hacking up bloody phlegm, then nodded his head.

"Oh, I get it," Ranta realized. "Wezel, you are a wandering shaman, after all. Lumiaris's light magic isn't that good against disease, though, from what I hear."

"This is beyond me," Wezel said. "No one can treat a deadly illness... not even the beings we call gods."

"Huh? Then..."

Wezel took a little paper envelope from the leather bag which hung at his waist. Inside, there was a white powder. He put the powder into the leather water bottle which hung over his shoulder, then shook it.

Wezel turned his face towards Ranta. "Help me."

"...Sure."

Ranta had the orc sit up. Wezel passed the water bottle to the orc, but he was coughing badly. It looked like, in his weakened state, he didn't even have the strength to lift the bottle.

"Make him drink it," Wezel told him, so Ranta did as he was asked.

The orc took one sip from the bottle, but then immediately coughed it back up.

“No,” Wezel said. “Make him drink it. Every last drop.”

“Fine. If you say make him drink it, I’ll make him drink it...”

Now Ranta was feeling stubborn. He helped the orc to drink the contents of the bottle a little at a time. By the time he finished, the coughing had mostly stopped.

He lay the orc back down. Maybe he was at ease now, since his breathing was more relaxed. His eyes were opened only slightly, like he was half asleep.

The orc child approached, and sat next to the orc. The orc stared at him.

Wezel suddenly stood, then went outside, just like that.

“Ah! Hey!” Ranta hurried after him.

Wezel walked like he was going for a stroll.

Even when Ranta caught up, and walked alongside him, Wezel didn’t even look at him.

“Wezel, you... What did you make me give that orc?” Ranta asked.

He wasn’t expecting an answer. He thought Wezel would ignore him.

“A powerful drug.”

Wezel answered so easily, Ranta was actually surprised.

“So... poison, then,” he said.

“Anything... can be medicine or poison, depending how it is used.”

“And how did you use it?”

“He will... sleep soon. He will not wake. It is the eternal sleep.”

“You killed him?” Ranta asked.

“Tch, tch tch...” Wezel’s shoulders heaved with laughter, and he came to a stop. “Yes. He will sleep... and soon after, die.”

“Is that... what the kid asked you to do?”

“No.”

“What?”

“The child only said, ‘My father is sick. He’s suffering. Do something, please.’”

“You’re telling me that you pretended to give him medicine, and then made him drink poison instead?”

“He is not going to make it,” Wezel said simply.

The gray elf was likely telling the truth.

The orc probably had lung cancer, or something, and it was terminal. Every breath brought him pain too great to express in words. For that orc, every second was torture.

Of course, he wouldn’t want to leave his child behind. Still, that was what would inevitably happen.

Soon, that orc would be dead. He must have known his life was coming to an end.

The kid probably had known that, too.

“I saved him,” Wezel said. “That is all.”

“Man, just how many people have you... killed like that?”

Ranta didn’t expect an answer.

Wezel gave none, just a faint smile.

7. Rain

Torrential rain, that was what this was.

The hardened earth of the path through the mountains had been turned into a quagmire by heavy rain.

When he’d looked at the four orcs collapsed in that quagmire, he never would have thought that could just as easily have been him.

“Hahh... Hahh... Hahh...! Hahh...!”

His shoulders heaving with each breath, clutching his bloody katana, Ranta looked in every direction. Nothing was moving.

Or at least I don't think so. Not that I could tell in this rain. Nah, there's nothing. I took out our pursuers. For now, at least.

"Wezel! You okay?!" he shouted.

"...Yeah."

The voice he heard through the rain sounded awfully hoarse.

Looking over, Ranta saw that Wezel was down on one knee, grasping his left arm with his right hand.

Yeah, I thought so. Blood. He's bleeding badly. That's a lot of blood. Though, that said, it's just a deep cut to his left arm. He's not gonna die from it.

"Damn it!" Ranta sat down on a dead orc's belly. "The four of them were all skilled. What were they screwing around with us like this for? No... They weren't screwing around. These guys were serious. It was still easy, though. Because, hey, I'm just that great. But if I hadn't been me, those guys would've been bad news. Seriously."

Wezel was treating his wounds with his shaman powers. He'd be done soon.

"They've really got it out for you, huh, Wezel?" Ranta asked.

"I was asked, and without causing suffering, I saved them," Wezel said. "Many times. Now... I do not even remember who requested it."

"You liar," Ranta snorted. "I'm sure you know, you're just playing ignorant. Someone important out there ordered these goons to watch you. There were people in their way... political opponents, maybe? You finished them off. Am I wrong?"

"...Who knows."

"I'll bet I'm right. You're hated by the families of the people you killed. This guy, the one pulling the strings, he wants to shut you up, too. For this set of pursuers, well, I'd give you nine out of ten odds that's what they were."

"You... are a talkative man."

“I acknowledge that,” Ranta shrugged. “Keeping quiet when there’s something I want to say doesn’t suit me.”

Ranta thrust his katana into the ground nearby, and shifted his mask up to his forehead. His exposed face was doused with rain. He rubbed it hard with both hands.

“Oh!” He got up from on top of the orc corpse. “Sorry, man. You just happened to be in a good spot. No hard feelings, okay? You lost, I won. That means you don’t get to complain.”

While he was chatting with a corpse, Wezel went off somewhere else. When Ranta looked over, the elf was walking far off in the distance.

“Heeeey!” Ranta yelled.

If you’re going, say something! he thought indignantly. Actually, he had said as much a number of times, but it had always fallen on deaf ears.

Ranta returned his mask to its usual position, then chased after Wezel.

“Wezel. Wezelred!”

“...What?” the gray elf asked.

“It’s about time you told me,” Ranta said, catching up. “Where are you going, and what do you plan to do?”

“Once you know, what will you do?”

“I won’t *do* anything. I just want to know your heart. That’s why I’m asking.”

“My heart...” Wezel shook his head. For a moment, his feet wavered just the slightest bit, but that was all.

The silent treatment, huh?

Wezel kept walking. He was going down the mountain.

The intense rain didn’t let up. Was rain really a thing that could come down like this? Was it fine, falling so much? If too much fell, wouldn’t all the moisture be sucked out of the sky? What would they do if the sky ended up all dry?

“This is the point where I start wondering about stupid nonsense, huh?” Ranta muttered.

He was at his limit.

On the side of the path, which had turned into such muck that there was hardly any trace of it left, there was the opening to a cave.

“Wezel!” Ranta grabbed the elf by the arm, then pulled him towards the cave. “The rain’s awful. It’s not going to be letting up any time soon, either. Let’s take shelter here.”

Wezel sat down in silence. Seeing the way he sat down without resisting, this guy must have been exhausted, too.



Of course he was. How could he not be?

Ranta took off his cloak and wrung the water out of it. No matter how he squeezed, it kept dripping. Then, suddenly...

"It's the Shadow Forest," Wezel revealed.

"...Huh? The Shadow Forest—wait, you mean that place? The one where the elves live..."

"The forest city, Arnotu. Our homeland."

"Oh, yeah?" Ranta said. "So, you gray elves moved out of Arnotu in the Shadow Forest, and migrated to the Broken Valley?"

"Of the elves, roughly half of them left the forest," Wezel told him. "They sided with the No-Life King."

"Then, to the elves of the Shadow Forest, wouldn't that make a gray elf like you a traitor?"

"It was not exactly a betrayal. Those with a different opinion left the village."

"But you fought in opposing camps, right? To say that's just water under the bridge... well, it's usually not that easy." Ranta laid down his still-drenched cloak, and sat on top of it.

He was feeling weak. He'd taken a pummeling from the rain, then up and murdered four battle-hardened orcs that had been pursuing them. Even the great Ranta was gonna feel tired after all that.

That was why. No other reason. He tried to convince himself of that.

"I mean, even if there were circumstances, you guys did fight once," Ranta went on.

"I was born in the Broken Valley," said Wezel. "I did not choose to leave the forest myself."

"Oh, yeah? That makes sense. You're not like me, then."

With a *heh*, Ranta removed his mask. He shook his head like a dog. The way that sent water droplets flying everywhere was a good way of helping him get into a new frame of mind.

“So?” he said. “You’re going to the Shadow Forest, and you’re going to do what? Do you have distant relatives there or something?”

Wezel hung his head. “I have an acquaintance.”

“A gray elf like you wouldn’t be welcome in the Shadow Forest, right? Did you meet them somewhere else?”

“Well, yes.”

“You met this acquaintance, then parted ways,” Ranta summarized for him. “They went back to the Shadow Forest. You’re going out of your way to meet them, so I take it you want more than to just see their face, yeah?”

“I must tell that person.”

“Tell them what?”

“Danger is coming.”

Ranta paused. “To the Shadow Forest?”

Wezel had been saying that the former capital of the Kingdom of Arabakia, Rhodekia, now known as Grozdendahl, was a stronghold for the forces of the alliance.

Could it be that the allied forces meant to march on the Shadow Forest?

“The undead and the orcs, they’re about to kick off another war,” Ranta surmised. “Is that what this is about?”

“Do not misunderstand. The ones who started the fire were the humans.”

“If the guys from the Kingdom of Arabakia, who fled to the other side of the Tenryu Mountains, hadn’t come back and built Alterna, it would have ended there.” Ranta nodded. “Fair enough. If we’re looking at it from your perspective, that’s how it is.”

“Humans... oppressed and exploited the orcs and goblins,” Wezel told him. “You were given your comeuppance once. Though... the races that built the Undying Empire, too... were unable to overcome their discord. Even within the same race, there was enmity, conflict. We gray elves could not become a monolith, either. Because there is more than one of us...”

“You’re unusually talkative,” Ranta commented.

“You are ignorant. I am teaching you.”

“Thanks, Wezelred. The truth is, there’s too much we don’t know.”

It wasn’t just Ranta. The vast majority of volunteer soldiers threw themselves into battle without sufficient information. They were led to believe they couldn’t live without fighting. Then, soon enough, they got used to the fighting, and couldn’t think properly about anything else.

“This acquaintance of yours, I bet she’s a woman,” Ranta smirked.

Wezel did not answer. But it was totally a woman.

“Do you have to tell her in a hurry?” Ranta asked.

“It should be done as soon as possible.”

Things were starting to make sense.

Wezel hardly ever rested. Ranta had wondered if he was fine without rest, so he didn’t need to. But that wasn’t it.

Ranta donned the mask, wrapping himself in the still-wet cloak.

“Guess we’re going, then.”

8. Forest

The black forest spread out before them.

It was a forest, and the leaves were a verdant green if you looked closely, but the dense trees blocked out the light of the sun, leaving a darker impression.

The trees of the Shadow Forest were all so thick and tall that they seemed unreal.

The whole forest seemed like a giant monster that transcended human knowledge, and it felt like it might move at any moment.

“Is it safe to go in there?” Ranta asked cautiously.

“Tch, tch, tch...” Wezel’s shoulders shook with laughter. For as gloomy as the guy seemed, he could be pretty jolly. “How could it be? The Shadow Forest is a

natural fortress.”

“Man, you’ve never been to Arnotu before, have you?”

“No.”

“You know the way there?”

Wezel shrugged. That could be either a denial, or a confirmation.

“Wait, which is it?” Ranta demanded.

Wezel entered the forest without ever clarifying.

What was with his personality?

It was still before noon, but the forest was pretty dark. The ground was covered in moss. The earth was barely exposed at all. Some of the mushrooms and ferns that grew everywhere were luminescent, and the place was pretty in its own way.

Winged centipedes, jellyfish-like creatures that floated in the air, butterflies or moths that scattered phosphorescent dust as they fluttered by, and apes with a spider-like number of arms jumping from branch to branch. There were many unique creatures that stood out.

Wezel would proceed one way, turn back, then proceed another way before turning back again. There were rifts they couldn’t possibly jump over here and there, and when they ran into one, all they could do was detour around it.

Still, it was dark.

It had been dark since they’d entered the forest, but this was way too dark.

He couldn’t tell the direction of the sun. There was no way to check, because the trees blocked it out, but sunset was clearly approaching.

Had they walked that long? They must have. If they were actually getting closer to their destination, he was willing to walk as much as it took.

“Hold on, are we lost?” Ranta burst out.

“Yeah.”

“No, not ‘Yeah’! What are we gonna do about it?”

“I have a way...” Wezel said. “It will require preparation.”

“Then do it without me having to bring it up!”

“It will take two days.”

“Yeah, whatever. —Wait, two days?! That’s quite a long time, y’know?!”

“I must focus. Protect me.”

“Sure, that’s fine... No, it’s not fine, but still. I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“No.” Wezel set his luggage down, and started on his preparations.

All he did was lay a woollen mat down on the moss, sit cross-legged on it, drink some kind of drink, close his eyes, and stop moving. He was just sitting there.

“Oh, come on,” Ranta protested. “Here I was expecting you to do something amazing, and it’s just meditation?”

There was no response.

Ranta sighed, then leaned his back against a nearby tree and crossed his arms. “In a forest this big, you’d expect there to be some damn scary beasts around...”

They couldn’t afford to be careless. Ranta decided to focus, too.

He’d spent a long time having people after his life. He’d even wound up in a situation where he couldn’t move, sitting put for over a day telling himself, *I am a rock*, while not moving so much as a finger. It went without saying that, during that time, he hadn’t slept a wink. His eyes had been as wide as saucers, his ears constantly perked up.

He didn’t mean to boast—no, maybe this *was* boasting—but he could endure just about anything.

Ranta had experience, which gave support to his confidence that was never shaken by little things.

The secret to how Ranta endured, though this may seem paradoxical, was not enduring.

If he kept steeling himself, thinking, *I have to endure, I have to endure, I have*

to endure, it only made it harder. He instead went, *I'm not enduring, I'm not, no sirree, ho ho ho, I'm not enduring, this is no big deal*.

At some point, Ranta felt someone's breathing. It wasn't a sound, to be precise. If he were to use an existing word to describe it, it was a presence.

The breathing had been approaching from somewhere for awhile, and it wasn't entirely clear where it was. Still, the breather was there. Diagonally to the right behind Ranta, it was hiding in the shadow of a tree and watching them.

Ranta couldn't make out the shape of whatever was breathing. It was completely hidden.

Wezel was totally engaged in meditating.

Ranta deliberately looked towards the tree where the breather ought to be.

He put a hand on the hilt of his katana, and the presence disappeared instantly.

Was he imagining it, maybe? No. That wasn't it.

It hadn't vanished. He could feel it, just slightly. That presence had simply thinned. It was still there.

Fine, then.

In a contest of wills, he wouldn't lose. He couldn't possibly.

Ranta didn't look away from the tree where the presence was hiding. He kept his eyes fixed on it.

The forest brightened a little. The sun must have risen.

Ranta did not budge. Nor did the presence.

Wezel took a sip from his water bottle.

In that instant, there was a sound. The guy had left.

Ranta took his hand off the hilt of his katana, but if his tension was a string, it was still pulled taut. That presence could come back any time, so he kept searching for it.

Wezel was meditating.

He sure likes his meditation. Well, I guess he's not doing it because he likes it. Yeah, of course not.

It got dark again.

In the darkness of the night, the presence appeared once more. This time, right behind Ranta. Was it trying to attack him from behind?

There was no doubt about it. Ranta was confident. It was the same presence.

Wezel's breathing was labored. His breaths were awfully shallow. He groaned in discomfort from time to time, too. What was with that? Was it bad news?

Guess I'll lure it in, Ranta decided. Deliberately show an opening, and have it attack.

Then he rethought it.

No, whoever loses their patience first loses. If it's not coming, then fine. I'll wait as long as it wants.

Wezel took a swig from his water bottle. He was gulping it down. It looked like he drank the very last drop.

Wezel threw the bottle away, and drew his knife. He was drawing something on the ground with it.

The presence had apparently moved. Ranta felt it in the shadow of a different tree from before.

Not satisfied with just using the ground, Wezel started carving wounds into his own body with the knife, too. What, was he suicidal? Well, there was probably some reason behind it.

Wezel slid the knife over the fingers of his left hand, its palm, and the back of it, and then the fingers of his right hand, the palm, and the back of that hand, too. Then he rolled back up his sleeves, wounding his left arm, right arm, and even his face. If it weren't so dark, he'd have been a horrifying sight to behold with all the blood that must have been flowing. Ranta squinted and tried to make it out despite himself.

Suddenly, the presence was growing thicker. Was it finally coming?

It... wasn't?

The presence vanished at dawn.

There was a rumbling in Ranta's stomach, as if it had just remembered about food. He had been drinking water occasionally, but hadn't eaten a thing since they'd entered the Shadow Forest.

Wezel sat in a position with his legs crossed, his back hunched, and both hands holding his head, rocking his body back and forth constantly.

Was he saying something? Ranta couldn't hear it. His mouth was moving, though. It might be something ritualistic he was doing.

Ranta cautiously walked around the area, looking for anything that seemed edible. His stomach was empty, and he felt like he could eat anything now, but he couldn't actually. He pressed his tongue against grasses, mushrooms, and fruits, but all of them caused intense numbing or tingling sensations. If he was going to hunt, he'd need to move away from Wezel. That was a bad idea.

"Guess there's no choice," Ranta muttered, resorting to his final option.

It wasn't hard. They were everywhere. He found some in no time.

There was a line of ants marching across the mossy ground.

Ranta snatched one up, put it on his palm, and poked it with a finger. It was a large, green ant, about a centimeter long, but it didn't fight back.

He stuck it in his mouth, used his tongue to keep it from getting away, then chewed it. The characteristic sour taste of the ant was refreshing, and it had a slight sweetness, too. It was pretty tasty.

He caught ants and searched for other foodstuffs while remaining alert to his surroundings until the sun set again.

When it got dark, Ranta crouched next to Wezel, his hand lightly on the hilt of his katana.

Wezel was continuing his ritual, as before.

Eventually, the presence returned. Though it didn't show itself, of course. The

presence was almost right behind Ranta and Wezel.

It wasn't a wild beast. No matter how clever it was, no animal was this patient. It was a human, elf, orc, or some other highly intelligent creature.

Like he had up to this point, Ranta didn't panic, didn't make a fuss, and just waited. Not doing anything unnecessary.

It was harder than you might think. For ordinary people, that was. For a giant star like Ranta, it was a cinch.

Dawn was approaching.

"Phewwwwwwwwww..." Wezel let out a big, long breath. He finished exhaling.

The next moment, the guy's presence moved.

"Personal skill..." From his crouched position, Ranta sprang backwards diagonally. He spun in midair, drawing his sword, and looked down at the guy.

The guy looked up at him in shock.

He was a logok tree man—or was he?

His trunk-like body had arm and leg-like branches growing out of it, and he reminded Ranta of the race of trees that had turned into people, or people who had turned into trees, that they had encountered in Darunggar.

However, this guy only resembled one. He wasn't a logok. He was closer to being human. He was a creature that was like a human with bark for skin.

"Blade of Shadow!" Ranta shouted.

Landing behind the guy, he then jumped with Leap Out. If the enemy was behind him, he'd get behind them and launch an ambush. That was his personal skill, Blade of Shadow.

Ranta's blade closed in on the guy. The guy turned around, but didn't avoid it.

Why? Why wasn't he trying to dodge?

Because he didn't have to.

Some branch-like, tentacle-like things grew out of the guy's body, and

wrapped around the guy in an instant.

The hell? How was that even fair?

Ranta's katana went, *Boing*, and bounced off those tentacle-y things. They weren't hard. They were highly elastic.

"Whoa...?!"

And that wasn't all. They didn't just defend; they wrapped around Ranta's katana like snakes. The cheeky things were trying to ensnare him, were they?

"Damn it!" Ranta immediately used Exhaust to jump back.

Tens of those branch tentacles stretched towards him.

Ranta backed away further, striking away the branch tentacles with his katana. But, as expected, he couldn't cut them. All he could do was bat them away.

This was no good. It would only let him buy time. In which case...

"Personal Skill, Lightning..."

Ranta jumped to the right, then after shaking off the branch tentacles, he went forward, then left. Moving in the shape of a square bracket at high speed, he sprang at the guy.

"...Fast-strike!"

"...!" The guy jumped to the side, evading Ranta's slash.

Well, wasn't he speedy.

The guy rolled and got up, then gathered the branch tentacles at the end of each of his arms to form swords. He then came in slashing with both branch tentacle swords.

"Just what I wanted!" Ranta shouted.

Katana and branch tentacle sword violently collided. The guy's branch tentacle swords were highly elastic, and the knockback on them was insane. Each time it struck a branch tentacle sword, Ranta's katana was pushed back hard. It felt like it was jumping around. Ranta was a battle-hardened veteran, but he couldn't control that recoil easily.

“This’s... hard! But...!”

Ranta switched from slashes to thrusts. Not just ordinary thrusts, though.

“Personal Skill, Evil Spiral Stab!”

It was a twist. He used quick, twisting thrusts, one after another.

Those repeated twisting thrusts couldn't pierce through the guy's branch tentacle swords, either.

However, the twisting thrusts didn't get knocked back as badly as the slashes had, so his katana didn't go astray, and he could keep attacking.

The guy was forced onto the defensive.

He was pushed back by Ranta's vigor, got overwhelmed, and would eventually be forced into a corner.

“Koh...!” The guy let out a sound like the cork being pulled from a bottle, and countless branch tentacles grew from his body at once.

It was done in an instant. The guy was wrapped in branch tentacles. His defense was perfect now, or so he must have thought.

Ranta smirked beneath his mask. "O Darkness! O Lord of Vice! Demon Call!"

Something like a blackish purple cloud appeared. The cloud rapidly formed a vortex. The maelstrom solidified as he watched, taking on a familiar form.

It looked like it was wearing a suit of armor made of dark purple bone, there didn't seem to be even a single gap in it. The blade with the long grip that it held in both hands was awfully long and curved. "Extremely threatening" was the only way to describe it. If a child saw it, they would cry and scream and collapse on the spot.

The design of the armor, the shape of the weapon—nothing could be more shocking. It looked like a grim reaper, with a scythe to harvest lives.

"Sic 'em, Zodie!" Ranta shouted.

With that simple command as its master, the demon Zodie held its great scythe aloft.

"Ehehehehehehehehehehehehehehehe...!"

The guy must have determined the scythe was a threat. The branch tentacles he unleashed swarmed towards Zodie. A number of them did reach Zodie, but not enough to restrain the demon.

Zodie swung its scythe down. “Hehe... Ehehehehehehehehehe...
Ehe...”

Zodie's scythe split the tentacles, and the guy, in half.

The branch tentacles split by the scythe, as well as the ones left unscathed, all lost their strength at once.

The guy collapsed.

He'd been impressively bisected.

“Get embraced by Skullhell,” Ranta smirked.

“You, too... Ehehehehe...”

“Shut up, Zodie. Get lost.”

“Ehehehehehehehe... No way...”

"This is the last time I'll say it. Get lost right now, Zodie."

“He... Eheheh... You’re just a Ranta... Stupid... Stooooopid... Ehehehehehe...”

Even though the demon complained, Zodie turned into a dark purple cloud and vanished.

The dawn was about to break.

“Ruwintimroti...” Wezel finally began chanting. “Ruwingwinbodoichiewiris...
Yeruwifi... Imatebuimugaruwado... Machedowig...
Yerah’ishinruiwodorezukoedowigod... Yendangosimiyefod...
Tiwigodwigwafifihan...”

The forest filled with noise.

Despite there being no real wind, there was still a rustling in the leaves and grass.

Wezel looked up to the heavens, raising his hands up high. Moth scales rained down from somewhere, as if he had called them to him.

The scales shone and sparkled. Their glimmering drifted deeper and deeper into the forest.

“Don’t tell me...” Ranta was shocked. “They’re showing us the way? Through the forest, to Arnotu...”

“I used the Secret Art of the Forest,” Wezel murmured.

The elf looked emaciated, and his breathing was ragged. He was trying to lift his pack, but he was stumbling, and his hands were unsteady.

“It is an old technique, handed down in the Shadow Forest. I overstretched a bit. Normally, one such as I... could never use it.”

“Overstretched?” Ranta asked. “Man, what did you do?”

“Used secret drugs... to enhance my power.”

“You were doping, or something? There aren’t side effects or something, are there?”

“My life... will be shortened somewhat, that is all.”

“Good work,” Ranta said.

“Tch, tch, tch...” Wezel’s shoulders heaved with laughter. Was it anything to laugh about? Well, maybe it was so rough, all he could do was laugh.

Wezel crouched next to his luggage, then his eyes went to the guy’s corpse. “A treant? ...When?”

“You didn’t notice,” Ranta said. “I just murdered him. Maybe he was trying to eat us or something. He kept targeting us. You called him a treant, huh?”

“They say their race is older than the elves. That treant was likely... not young. The older they grow, the stronger they become.”

“Not strong enough to take me on, apparently,” Ranta smirked. “Should we bury him?”

“Either way, he will return to the earth... to this forest.”

“Oh, yeah?” Ranta easily hoisted Wezel’s luggage. “I’m getting pretty tired of the scenery around here. Let’s go sightseeing in Arnotu.”

9. Blood

Even if the forest itself was guiding them, that didn't make the road any shorter. A day and a night passed, and they still had yet to reach anything resembling a forest city.

On top of that, Wezel went into the bushes to take a piss or something, and he didn't come back.

"...The hell, man?" Ranta grumbled. "I'll go on without you, you know? Uh, not that there'd be much point. I don't really have any business there..."

There was nothing else for it. Ranta plopped himself down on top of Wezel's luggage, which was lying on the ground.

The fact was, the phosphorescent trail showing them the way had vanished a little earlier. If Ranta tried to get to Arnotu alone like this, he probably wouldn't make it.

Something's weird, he thought.

Honestly, Ranta had detected what was going on, and it wasn't as vague as a mere "something."

"I'm surrounded again," he muttered. "Of course. More treants? No... that's not it."

Sighing, he scratched his head. *Okay, what now? There's a number of options. First, let's try this.*

Ranta got down off the luggage and jogged towards the bushes where Wezel had gone.

"Gotta piss, gotta piss..."

There was a sound of something cutting through the air, and Ranta stopped short of the bushes.

There was an arrow standing in the ground a little in front of his feet.

Ranta clicked his tongue, and put his hand on the hilt of his katana. "I told you, I've gotta piss!"

The arrow had come in from the left. When he turned that way, there was

another arrow.

The second arrow was coming at Ranta's chest.

"...!"

Ranta drew his katana and struck the arrow.

What is this sound? Footsteps? How many are there?

Turning back, there were pointy-eared men with swords leveled at him.

Elves, huh?

"Too close...!" he muttered.

The elves' swords had come to a stop just short of nicking his throat.

He'd never have thought they'd get this close.

If it was just one, that would be one thing, but there were three of them. He should have noticed, normally. He didn't think he'd gotten lax, but he must have let his guard down.

Still, these elves were skilled.

In particular, one of the three, the middle-aged elf in the middle, looked pretty capable.

"Human," the middle-aged elf spoke. "What are you doing in our forest?"

Ranta chuckled. "How do you know I'm human? I could be an ogre or a demon, couldn't I?"

"If you are such a vile being, let us end you here."

"Whoa! Stop!" Ranta pushed up his mask with his left hand, allowing them to see his face. "Good guess. I'm not an ogre or demon. I'm human. What? I'm on, uh, a vacation? No, I've got business here... Well, I don't. There's a guy with me. I'm along for the ride..."

"You would appear to be alone," the elf said coldly.

"H-He went off somewhere, okay?"

"You expect us to believe you?"

“Think about it. This is the Shadow Forest, right? I’m preaching to the squire here... No, that’s not it, how did it go? Well, anyway, I don’t have to tell you this, because you elves already know, but this place is nowhere a single human could wander into on their own. Right?”

“That is indeed true.”

“Right? I was led here with the Secret Art of the Forest.”



“Why would a human know the secret arts practiced by us forest elves?”

“No, that’s just it! Obviously, I don’t know anything about them. It wasn’t me, it was my traveling companion... Whuh?!”

He felt something wrap around his ankles. Looking down, some sort of ivy-like plant had grown and wrapped around both Ranta’s legs.

“Wh-Wh-What is this?!” he shouted.

“We will hear your excuses after this.”

“After...?”

There was another elf, behind the other three.

This elf was a woman.

Elves were generally on the slim side, but she looked thin even by their standards. He’d had a vague image of elves, especially the women, all having long hair, too. However, her silver hair was cut short.

What was the female elf doing, down on one knee, with both hands touching the ground?

“A shaman!” Ranta gasped.

In an instant, more vines than he could possibly count wrapped themselves around Ranta. They even forced themselves into his mouth and nose, instantly rendering him unable to breathe.

Whoa. I said, whoa. Whoa, whoa, whoa. This isn’t funny! I’m gonna die here... seriously!

Ranta passed out.

When he came to, he found he had been forced to sit in an incredibly tight place.

At least let me lie down, he wanted to gripe. They should have been able to afford him that much kindness, at least.

But, no, it was physically impossible. The ceiling was low, after all. It couldn’t get much lower than this. The breadth and depth of the room were short, too,

each less than a meter. There was no space for him to lie down.

He had been stripped of his mask and relieved of his possessions, katana included.

The walls behind and on either side of him seemed rock hard, but they were apparently wood. The entire front side was a barred door. Was it made not of iron, or any other such metal, but of wood, too?

The barred door was wrapped with thorny plants, and they would definitely prick him if he touched them.

On the other side of the door was a corridor. It seemed there was light not far away, and some of it reached him here.

Was there no one in the corridor? He didn't sense anyone.

"They were saying they'd hear my excuses later," Ranta muttered. "Meh, someone'll come eventually, I'm sure."

However, wait as he might, not one person—no, maybe he should say not one elf—though either was fine, really, it didn't make a difference, because no one showed any sign of coming.

"How about some food?" Ranta murmured. "Or some water? None? There is none? No, really? Man, no one warned me about this. You never told me about this. What the hell? Is this some kind of abandonment play? I'm going to sleep... or I would. But I can't lie down..."

He couldn't help but be disheartened by this.

In times like this, he ought to get worked up and keep his fighting spirit going, but that was no good. No, no. Absolutely not. He couldn't do that.

People's spirits go up and down. Even if he could control his temporarily, there would be side effects somewhere along the line. It wasn't good to overthink things and get depressed, or to carelessly work himself up. He had to accept things as they were. His spirits would rise and fall, until they ultimately settled somewhere in the middle.

Through his mind flashed faces, faces, faces...

He didn't dwell on any of them. He let them appear, then fade and vanish on

their own.

The same with arms.

And chests.

Yeah. They were appealing to him, sure. Super appealing. But he didn't dwell on them.

Not on thighs.

Not even on butts.

Even that blindingly bright smile—

“...Urgh!”

Ranta gritted his teeth. For some reason, that cheerful and soft smile, filled with innocence, and without ulterior motives, refused to vanish.

Gotta dispel it. Forget it. Forget it. Forget it already.

He knew.

He could never forget. There was no way he could. If that weren't the case, Ranta wouldn't be here now.

Why was he trying to get back to Alterna?

Because I want to see her.

Maybe she'd never speak to him again. That was fine. He just needed to see that face.

It's stupid. I'll see her face, and then what?

There's nothing I can do now.

It's meaningless.

I mean... she's not going to smile at me anymore, right?

He heard footsteps. He wasn't imagining them. They were approaching.

Ranta shut his eyes tight, breathing slowly.

“...Finally.”

His eyes opened.

“Hwhuh?” he let out in a strange voice.

There was a child standing in front of the bars. An elf, of course. They were longer-lived than humans, and their development was slower, but a child was a child. This one would be six in human years, seven or eight at most. Though her hair was cut short, judging by her face, it looked like she was a girl. She was holding something like a short staff.

Suddenly, it occurred to him that she resembled someone. That was odd, because he didn’t know many elves.

Oh. It was her. The silver-haired elf woman who had captured Ranta with that vine technique. This girl looked like that shaman. Though maybe he only thought that because they both had silver hair that was cut short for a girl.

The elf girl was staring at Ranta through the thorn covered bars. Her eyes were red as blood.

Ranta gulped. “You—”

“Human. If you want out, I will let you out.”

“...Huh?”

“Which will it be?” the elf girl asked.

“Well... if I said I don’t want out, I’d be lying.”

“Which will it be?”

“I want out.”

“Then you should have said so from the beginning. You disgust me.”

“I disgust you?” Ranta grumbled. “Listen...”

“I am Leaya.”

The girl who gave her name as Leaya knocked on the bars three times with her short staff.

Then—oh, whoa, what was this? The thorny branches that were wrapped tight around the bars came undone and slithered away.

Leaya pulled a key from her pocket, inserted it in the keyhole, and turned it.

There was a clack, and it unlocked.

He felt like he was being tricked somehow, but Ranta opened the bar door and went out into the corridor. His waist hurt, his back hurt, his knees hurt—he hurt all over—so he knew it wasn't an illusion. Ranta did some stretches, rotated his hips, and shook his wrists and ankles.

"Here I was, ready to be tortured, too," he said.

"We have bigger problems now."

"...What do you mean?"

"The forest is under attack," Leaya stated calmly.

"Hmm," Ranta said. "Well, ain't that a shame. The forest is... wait, under attack?!"

"That is what I said, yes."

"I heard you. But, under attack...? Oh, by the allied forces, huh? That's gotta be it. They're already attacking?"

"That's why we no longer have time to waste on some suspicious human."

"You forest elves sure are soft," Ranta scoffed.

"Why?"

"It's possible that a suspicious human could be an enemy spy, right?"

"Are you?"

"Well, no, I'm not, but still."

"I know." Leaya was expressionless, and awfully calm, too.

This was just Ranta's imagination, but she probably had not come from a privileged household, or been raised with love from all around her. Besides, Leaya's mature, unswerving eyes were red as blood.

"Leaya," Ranta said. "Did an old man ask you to come let me out of this cage?"

"My mother did."

"She's the shaman with silver hair, like yours."

“Yes. My mother’s name is Alorya. But...” Leaya lowered her eyes, biting her lip a little. “It was a strange old man who asked my mother to do it. I’ve never seen him before. It was a strange old man I’ve never met.”

“I see.” Ranta put his hand on top of Leaya’s head. Unconsciously. It didn’t suit him, but he didn’t feel like he’d messed up.

He followed his heart, blazing his own trail. That was his rule. If he wanted to pat a kid on the head, he was gonna do it whether it suited him or not.

“Either way, you’re the one who saved me,” Ranta said. “I owe you one. I swear I’ll pay you back. If there’s anything I can do, name it.”

“For a start, get your dirty hand off me.”

“Oh?” Ranta pulled his hand back.

Hesitantly, he looked at his own hand. Certainly, it was hard to call it clean. Actually, it was pretty damn filthy.

“You got anything to wipe it with?” he asked. “Uh, sorry about that...”

10. Myself

Leaya brought Ranta his confiscated katana and mask. Wezel’s luggage and his other things were too heavy for her to lug out of storage, she said.

Ranta put on the mask, and hung the katana diagonally over his back. Then, with Leaya leading the way, he went outside.

As he’d kind of suspected, the jail had been carved out of an oversized tree and built inside.

“This is Arnotu, huh?” Ranta murmured. “What a city...”

To describe it simply, it was a treetop city. There were giant trees with a diameter of over ten meters growing here and there, and platforms had been built out of logs in their boughs, with planks to create floors, and houses and whatnot built on top. It seemed there were bigger buildings that used the tree trunks as supporting pillars, too.

There were what looked like elevators set up here and there. No, they didn’t

just look like elevators; they were. They went up and down between Arnotu and the surface.

There were bridges from one giant tree to the next, allowing travel from one to another.

The majority of the bridges weren't straight. Was there some engineering reason for that? Or was it out of concern for how they looked? They formed awfully beautiful arches.

There were baskets filled with luminous mushrooms hanging from the buildings and bridges, and they swayed in the wind. It seemed every basket had a bell attached. When the basket swayed, there was a clear ring. The sound of ringing bells overlapped and echoed. It was like music.

There were many colored flowers used in a variety of decorations, too. They were fragrant if he brought his nose close to them, but the most intense smell in this city right now was the smell of something burning.

There was a dim smoke throughout the treetop city. Was there a fire somewhere? He couldn't spot the flames.

The smoke was likely drifting in from outside Arnotu.

"They're attacking with fire, huh?" Ranta muttered. "Do they plan to burn the whole Shadow Forest to the ground?"

Armed elves busily ran across the bridges. Ten or so elves were riding an elevator down to the ground. Arnotu was preparing for battle. No, there were signs the battle had already begun.

Leaya and Ranta eventually reached a deserted corner. The bridge here was old, and the giant tree they crossed over to had cracks in it. The boards that made up the floor were slanted, or in some places rotted through, and they creaked no matter where he stepped. It seemed like it could collapse at any moment.

This was a dangerous area that should have been off limits, but Leaya's mother, the shaman Alorya, was waiting for them. So was Wezel.

"Hmph," Ranta snorted when he reached them. "Nice of you to use me as a

decoy, Wezel.”

“I will not make excuses,” the gray elf shrugged. “From the beginning... I intended to use you. If I had not, I doubt I could have entered Arnotu.”

“Well, it’s fine,” Ranta said. “I’m out of jail now.”

He patted Leaya on the head again despite himself.

His hand was immediately swatted away.

“Don’t touch me.”

“Whoops. Uh, sorry. You’re just too darn cute.”

“I am *not* cute,” Leaya snapped. “I’m contrary and unsociable. Everyone hates me. I know that much. My father’s not even a forest elf.”

Wezel turned his eyes downward. It wasn’t like him, but he looked disheartened.

Alorya, who was standing close to Wezel, was hanging her head, perhaps unable to look at her daughter.

“When you two split up, she was pregnant with Leaya?” Ranta assumed.

“...Yes,” Wezel said in a groaning voice. “I... was not aware. That Alorya... was with child.”

“If you’d known, would things have been different?”

“I don’t know. I am not a man who is cut out to be a father. I am a killer... to the core. For as far back as I remember, I have been using drugs.”

“That job of yours, where you euthanize people who are already dying, is it a family thing?” Ranta asked.

“You... could call it that. It is one school of shamanism which has been handed down in my family. My younger brother Weldrund refused to inherit it, and ran away. I left the Broken Valley after that, so I cannot speak ill of my brother for it, though.”

“Wel...” Ranta cocked his head to the side. “I feel like... I’ve heard that name somewhere... Weldrund? Oh, yeah, that was the name of the shaman who was in Forgan, wasn’t it?”

“Forgan.” Wezel’s eyes went wide. “My brother... in Forgan?”

“You know Forgan?” Ranta asked.

“The Black Eagle Band, Forgan... led by the great Jumbo. I have heard of them, yes. They are at the center of the allied force currently attacking the Shadow Forest.”

“Whuh...” For an instant, Ranta’s mind went blank. “No.”

That word slipped from his lips, and then he burst into laughter.

“...No, no, no. No way. That can’t be right. I mean, it’s Forgan. You may not know this, but old man Takasagi’s in Forgan. There’re humans in the group. Birth, race, they don’t care about that. They’re a freewheeling bunch that’ve gathered around Jumbo. That’s the kind of group they are.”

“You speak almost... as if you know them, directly.”

“I don’t know them.” Ranta deliberately strengthened his tone. “I don’t know them... but why would Forgan do this? It makes no sense.”

“I do not know the details, either,” Wezel said. “But the rumors say... the orcish king Dif Gorgun took hostages, and forced Forgan to serve under him.”

“Jumbo’s supposed to be an orphan,” Ranta said slowly. “But I guess Forgan does have a lot of orcs in it.”

“This is how that king operates. I, too... was a tool of the king.”

“Yeah, and?” Leaya glared at Wezel. Her thin shoulders were tense, and her little hands were clenched tight. “The orcish king manipulated you, made you kill people. You’re a bad man. A horrible villain. My mother’s an utter moron who made the mistake of falling for you while she was traveling. It would have been better for her if she’d never met you, but her timing was bad. Worse yet, you’re heartless, irresponsible, and selfish, so you threw her away. Thanks to that, my mother had to drag herself back to Arnotu because she was pregnant. To give birth to me. She must have known she was pregnant, but my mother didn’t tell you. Because it’s rare to find someone as incredibly shitty as you. Because my mother’s a hopeless fool. She was born the eldest daughter of the House of Landurowal of the Six Spells, but she was a coward and ran away,

unable to bear the pressure. Despite that, she came back to Arnotu, and gave birth to me alone, as everyone looked on in derision. With a mother like that, and with the blood of a gray elf, I am always, always, always bullied. I have no friends. No adults protect me. No one helps. I have the worst, most terrible life ever. That's what it's been so far, and what it will be from now on! Nothing good ever happens! I...!"

"Just go." Ranta came close to patting Leaya on the head again, then caught himself and grabbed her by the shoulder instead. "Leaya. You have a mother. Maybe he's a bum, but you've got a father, too. The three of you should go together. For now, yeah, you should flee to somewhere safe, and then you can live there, or you can set out on a journey once things settle down. You'll have any number of friends in the future. I mean, seriously, you're adorable. You'll find yourself a lover, too, eventually. This city's full of nothing but shitheads who bully you, right? Well, then there's not one good reason for you to cling to the place. You're alive, and you're free. Now, quit moping. Go on, go!"

Ranta pushed Leaya towards the elevator.

"Wezel! And, uh, was it Alorya? You, too!"

The four of them got on the elevator together. It was an old type, not like the ones in use now, and the chain for raising and lowering it was red with rust.

Is this thing going to work properly? Ranta was worried, but when he pulled that chain, it did move. He worked with Wezel to lower the elevator.

The smoke on the ground was thinner than in Arnotu. When he looked upwards, he couldn't see the sky, but he could make out the light shining through the branches. It was daytime.

The elevator had a number of luminous mushroom baskets on it, and there were towers in every direction, too. It wasn't bright, but it wasn't that dark, either. He couldn't hear their voices or the sounds of battle, but he could see elven figures off in the distance. Nearly all of the elevators were moving, and elves were coming down one after another.

"Wezel, any idea where you'll go?" Ranta asked.

"...Some."

“Okay, then.”

“What will you do?”

“I’m...” Ranta started to say, then held up his left hand lightly.

He grasped the hilt of his katana with his right.

Leaya tried to say something, but when Ranta brought the index finger of his left hand to the mouth of his mask, Leaya shut her mouth. Alorya held her daughter close.

Where is it? he wondered. *This presence—it’s probably eyes.*

We’re being watched.

From where?

The area directly below Arnotu must have been being maintained by the elves or something, because there wasn’t the slightest bit of foliage, so it would be hard to hide something even the size of a dog. In which case...

How many of these giant trees were there supporting the treetop city of Arnotu? More than ten or twenty. Taking a rough guess, maybe a hundred.

The closest giant tree to the one Ranta and the others had descended from, in the old elevator, was easily more than twenty meters away. That giant tree had no elevator.

Ranta suddenly jumped with Leap Out. He closed in on the giant tree that was his target in no time, and they came out.

They came out of the shadow of the giant tree.

The guy was dressed in black. He was wearing what looked like a balaclava, so Ranta couldn’t see his face. Judging by his build, though, this wasn’t an orc.

He was human or undead, then? His arms were strangely long, so he had to be undead. There were short swords in both of his hands.

“Personal Skill...” Ranta drew his katana.

He came to a sudden stop right in front of the undead’s nose—or that was what he made it look like. It should create an illusion like he was moving to the left. The undead eyes did, in fact, follow him in that direction. However, no one

was there.

The undead guessed Ranta had gone the other way and looked right, but he wasn't there, either, and he wasn't in front of him, either. Ranta was nowhere to be found.

Had he vanished? The undead got confused. There was no way he could have vanished.

That was right. He hadn't.

"Mirage Slash!" Ranta was right in front of the undead. However, if the undead didn't look downwards, he wouldn't be able to see him.

From a stance so low his left knee touched the ground, Ranta swung his katana upward diagonally with all his might.

It was perfect. He was at killing range, and his timing was excellent, but the undead crossed his short swords, and blocked Ranta's katana with a clang.

This undead wasn't your ordinary opponent.

Good. Fine by me. Now you've got me fired up. Ranta instantly pulled back his katana.

"Personal Skill, Rantah...!"

He actually wanted to say Random Flurry, but he tripped over his tongue. Well, not like the name mattered.

He struck, and struck, and struck. From the top, from the right, from the top right, from the top left, from the top again, right, right, left, right, top, right, left, left, he swung his katana.

Daaaamn. The undead could fend off a combo this long? With those short swords? He hadn't looked like much. He didn't make much of an impression. If anything, he'd seemed like cannon fodder, but this undead was seriously strong.

Sure, Ranta was on the offensive. If he wasn't, he'd be in trouble. He had to keep attacking, or he felt like the tables would be turned on him in an instant. In that case, he'd just have to attack, attack, attack.

“Personal Skill, Horizontal Rain!”

Ranta switched to thrusts. He thrust madly, like he was trying to create a line of spears all by himself. It was no exaggeration to call it a furious assault.

But the undead easily deflected everything with his short swords, making the thrusts go astray. He was neutralizing Ranta’s attacks with minimal effort.

Was he some kind of master? There were always guys out there like this.

Still, Ranta wasn’t attacking without purpose. He had a plan. He’d get his opponent used to thrusts, then change. This was preparation. He’d thrust, and thrust, and thrust, and— “Wha...?!”

Suddenly, the undead jumped back, right into the giant tree.

What? Why? What happened? Still not understanding, Ranta tried to close in on the undead. He felt like he was being lured in, but his body moved on its own. It shouldn’t have.

The undead kicked the ground, sending a mixture of moss and dirt flying towards him.

“Huh?!” Ranta came close to shutting his eyes despite himself, but he resisted. The dirt only distracted him for a brief instant.

In that time, the undead hid himself.

“What is he, a ninja?!” Ranta instinctively looked up.

Bingo. The undead had thrust his sword into the giant tree, and was clinging on to it.

“...Heh. Hah! I’mma niiinja!” The undead thrust his two swords in to the giant tree in turn, higher and higher each time, climbing upwards.

“Whoa, whoa... Seriously?” Ranta said. “Even I’m not gonna be able to chase after that. Hold on, intruders...”

That undead wasn’t necessarily the first to arrive. The enemy had already entered Arnotu. He had to assume that.

“Wezel!” Ranta yelled.

If that was the case, they were best off getting out of the Shadow Forest as

soon as possible. Wezel and the others were standing still in front of the old elevator.

Ranta was going to shout, *Go!* at them, but the loud howling got in his way.

Not of dogs. He immediately knew those were the howls of wolves.

Wezel hugged Alorya and Leaya. If he'd been alone, he'd have fled long before Ranta told him to. He'd crossed many a dangerous bridge before, and he was still alive because he knew how to get himself out of a crisis. But now he had two people in need of protection with him. One of them was just a child, and his daughter at that.

"How awkward for you, gray elf," Ranta called. "You're so lame, it's awesome. I don't mind guys like you."

Ranta flew all the way to Wezel and his family's side.

"O Darkness, O Lord of Vice! Demon Call!"

When he called Zodie the demon, Leaya's eyes bugged out like she had just run into the reaper himself. "What is that?!"

"Ehe... Just a hot guy... passing by... Ehehehehe...." Zodie said.

"Drop the stupid nonsense," Ranta snorted. "We're doing this, Zodie."

The wolves were still at a distance, so they looked like a horde of pitch black rats, but they were unquestionably black wolves.

Yeah, there were pitch black wolves charging in from the forest.

"There are no black wolves in Arnotu," Alorya whispered to herself in a daze.

It was hard to imagine black wolves had wandered into the Shadow Forest, which was not their territory, of their own accord. It was practically impossible. Someone had deliberately brought the black wolves all the way here.

Ranta knew only one man who could pull off that feat.

"Onsa, huh?" he muttered. That was Forgan's goblin beastmaster.

It wasn't just black wolves. Ranta could see humanoid figures on the other side.

“Is everyone here?” Ranta adjusted his grip on his katana. His hand was quivering slightly.

“Ehe...” Zodie cackled. “Are you scared, Ranta? You insignificant chicken... Ehehehehe...”

“Shove off. You think someone as awesome as me is afraid?”

He could see the flickering of torches or some other flame in the distance. There were a fair number of them.

The black wolves weren’t attacking—they were just barking and trying to intimidate as they surrounded them.

Following behind the black wolves, was that an orc? Judging by his build, it could be a human.

Ranta pointed behind to the rear, diagonally to the left. “That way! There’re no enemies yet. When I give the signal, go.”

“Ranta...” Wezel began.

“Protect your family, Wezel.”

Oh, yeah, Ranta grinned. *I nailed it.*

As he was backing in secret glee, suddenly Leaya tackled him, and Ranta nearly let out a groan of surprise.

Huh? What? What was that? No, no, don’t panic. As an adult man, I need to show my composure here.

“What is it?” he demanded.

“Am I...”

Leaya pressed her face against Ranta’s chest, hugging him tight around the waist, and squeezed hard.

It actually hurt pretty bad, but Ranta was a man, so he sucked it up and pretended everything was fine.

Eventually, Leaya looked up. Her eyes were moist. Her cheeks, red.

“...seriously cute?” she finished.

“Yup.” Ranta gave her a cool smile.

He hated to admit it, but she’d made his heart skip a beat. His face might’ve looked a bit goofy as a result. It was a good thing he had his mask on. She was just a kid, after all. He was an adult, and a man.

“You’re seriously, seriously, super seriously cute,” Ranta told her.

“I’ll choose to believe you.”

“See ya, Leaya.”

“I don’t think we’ll ever meet again,” she said.

“Guess you’re right, huh?”

“Probably.”

Leaya pushed Ranta away as they parted.

The black wolves were howling loudly.

“You’re too noisy. Shut up!” It was the sound of a human voice—a man shouting, echoed.

Ranta knew that voice.

The man advancing in between the black wolves had just one eye, and one arm.

It was old man Takasagi.

He’s gotten older, Ranta thought. But he’s looking better than I’d’ve expected.

Ranta put his hand on the hilt of his katana. “Now.”

When he gave the signal in a quiet voice, Wezel took off running, taking Alorya, and Leaya with him.

Takasagi went to go after them, but that wasn’t going to happen.

“Zodie, kill ’em all!” Ranta yelled.

These weren’t enemies he could take if he didn’t go into this prepared to do that much.

Ranta jumped in with Leap Out. Takasagi’s right eye went wide. Maybe he

realized. When he'd seen this katana, he should have.

You gave it to me, after all, Ranta thought.

"You bastard...!" he yelled.

Takasagi drew his katana. Damn the old man. He was smiling. Now that they'd met, it was time to settle things, was that it?

Ranta drew and swung. When their two katanas collided, there was a high-pitched clang, and sparks went flying.

Takasagi pushed with his katana. Their hilts locked.

Takasagi was old and experienced. It was obvious he should disengage right away, but he couldn't help but want to test his strength.

Under the mask, Ranta smiled.

Am I being true to my own heart?

Of course.

Until the day that Skullhell takes me, I will never betray it.

Afterword

As I have said publicly in the past, I hate Ranta. But after all he's been through, Ranta is likely changing.

Feelings of the Mask has so many of the good parts of Ranta in it, I nearly ended up liking him.

Next time, the plan is to give all of you a Yume story. It's still in the planning stage, but I look forward to writing about what Yume's been up to, and what will happen to her.

By the way, I was in charge of series composition and scriptwriting on the anime *Fairy Gone*, which began airing in April 2019.

I never thought it would be so much fun to make something with other people. Still, I enjoy thinking and writing about things by myself too, so I would like to keep working on novels, scriptwriting, original concepts, and whatever other opportunities arise in future.

Now then, to my editor, Harada-san, to the illustrator, Eiri Shirai-san, to the designers of KOMEWORKS among others, to everyone involved in production and sales of this book, and finally to all of you people now holding this book, I offer my heartfelt appreciation and all of my love. Now, I lay down my pen for today.

I hope we will meet again.

Ao Jyumonji

Bonus Short Stories

Scene #16: Something Lost

Why was Haruhiro walking around with his head down? That was a long story—or not.

Actually, he had dropped his phone.

He got out of school, headed home, and played with his phone. He remembered that much clearly. After that, he headed out. He went to a bookstore, wandered around the park, dropped by a convenience store, and took a stroll down the tree-lined road on the embankment. During that stretch, he was sure he had checked his phone a number of times, but he had no distinct memory of it.

It'll be getting dark soon, he thought, and was about to head home. He tried to check the time on his phone, but it wasn't there. He'd dropped it, or left it behind somewhere.

First he went around to the bookstore, the public washroom, the convenience store, and anywhere else indoors where it might be. He tried asking the staff if anyone had found a lost phone, too. He found nothing. So he followed the path he must have taken, and was looking for any phones on the ground.

It may just be gone, he started to think. But lost objects had a way of turning up just as you gave up on them. If he lost his smartphone, it was going to be all kinds of trouble.

I'd better look harder, he thought, leaning forward and looking down as he walked over Tsukimi Bridge.

Then he ran into something.

"Ow!" cried a girl's voice.

"Urgh!" yelped Haruhiro.

When he looked up, a long-haired girl in a school uniform was holding her head.

“S-S-Sorry! Hold on... Huh?”

“...Huh?” She looked at him, blinking. The head-on-head collision they had gotten into must have hurt. Her eyes were all teary. “Iima... Haruhiro-kun?”

“Um... Kakimiya Merii-san?”

There was no doubt about it. It was unmistakable, in fact. This was his classmate, Kakimiya Merii. Her looks were so distinctive that she couldn't possibly be anyone else.

“Wait, why are you using my full name?” Haruhiro asked.

“Well... I make a point of committing my classmates' names to memory.”

“Everyone's?” Haruhiro asked, and Kakimiya nodded.

“Everyone's,” she confirmed. “So, it just slipped out.”

“I... see.”

“Iima Haruhiro,” Kakimiya addressed him by his full name again. Then she hurriedly corrected herself. “Iima-kun... what are you doing here?”

“Ohh, I'm, well... What was it? Right. I just remembered. I lost my phone.”

“Huh?” Kakimiya's eyes suddenly went wide, surprising him, too.

“...Huh? What? What's up?”

“Me, too,” she said. “I lost my phone, and I'm looking for it. What a coincidence.”

“Y-Yeah. It sucks, huh? Losing your phone. ...Are you okay?”

“Are *you*, Iima-kun?”

“Uh, sure, I'm fine... or maybe not so much. I mean, I was looking for it...”

When he was talking to Kakimiya, he felt off kilter for some reason. He couldn't look at her face.

Does a guy like me have any right to look at her? he wondered.

Because of that, he was looking to the side, and there he saw a phone sitting on top of the railing.

Not his. But just maybe, he thought, picking it up, and showing it to Kakimiya. “Um, Kakimiya-san, is this it...?”

“That’s mine!” Kakimiya, probably without intending to, snatched the phone away from him. When she did, their hands touched, and Kakimiya immediately said, “I’m sorry!”

“...Nah.”

“This phone is really important to me. I’m so glad you found it.”

“Yeah. I’m happy for you. But what was it doing here?”

“I don’t know,” she said. “Oh, but when I came through here, I saw the moon. Look.”

Kakimiya brought up an image on her phone to show him. It was apparently a photo she had taken from this spot. It was evening, and he felt like he might be able to vaguely make out something small floating in the dark sky.

“It didn’t turn out very well,” she apologized. “It looked so big, but it’s so small on the camera.”

As the situation had necessitated, Kakimiya was now standing shoulder-to-shoulder with him. He felt awkward, so he gently moved away from her.

“Yeah,” he said. “That happens.”

“I even used the... zoom? I used that function, but it still didn’t get all that big. It’s really disappointing.”

Kakimiya’s shoulders slumped and she let out a sigh. He started to feel bad for her, and he wanted to be encouraging, but it was too great a burden for him.

“Well, I’m off,” he tried to leave, but...

“Iima-kun!” she called after him.

“...Wh-What?”

“Thank you. For finding it.”

“Nah, it was just sort of there. It’s no big deal.”

“Your phone is next,” she said.

“Next?”

“Need to find it.”

“...Yeah.”

Well, yeah, of course he did. He intended to look. But he didn’t want to say, *It’s fine, I’ll look for it on my own*. Kakimiya may have just been saying that to encourage him.

“Well, then...”

He started walking, and Kakimiya followed. It seemed she intended to look for it with him.

“Uh, I’m fine, you know?” he tried saying, but Kakimiya just nodded. He wasn’t getting through to her. He didn’t know what to do. He hoped he’d find his phone before that drove him crazy.

Scene #17: Man is a Thinking Horse

Bzzt, went the electrical current.

Isurugi Ranta and Tsurugi Monzo were trying to cross a fairly busy crosswalk. The crosswalk signal changed from red to green, and the pedestrians all began to move. Ranta tried to walk, too. When he did, an idea came to him. Oh, did it come to him.

“This is the time for... pushups, don’t you think?” he said.

“Huh...?” Monzo looked at Ranta with a silly face that said, *What are you saying all of a sudden, Ranta-kun?*

Didn’t he know what pushups were? Pushups! Though, rather than try to convince him, it was better to strike while the iron was hot. He need to do it right now. Time was a moving thing, and timing this perfect didn’t come around too often.

“Make way, make way!” Ranta pushed his way through the crowd, got ahead

of them, and ran.

Reaching the middle of the crosswalk, he got down and put both hands on the ground. He stretched out both legs behind him. Ranta's arms, chest, and legs formed a beautiful right triangle with the ground.

"Here I go! Hahhhh...!"

Ranta started doing some intense pushups. Not ordinary pushups. These weren't your easygoing, lackadaisical pushups, not by any means. They were fast. He bent and straightened his arms devilishly fast. Everyone watching had to think, *Whoa, that's fast!* He was doing super high speed pushups in—can you believe it?—the middle of the crosswalk.

"R-Ranta-kun?! What on earth are you doing?!" Monzo was babbling, but Ranta didn't care. *Hoo, hoo, hoo*, with rhythmical breaths, he kept on doing pushups.

The pedestrians were gonna be shocked stupid. Gwahahahaha! There was a buzz from the crowd, a buzz, damn it! There were some of them snapping photos, and shooting videos, too. They were going to spread this? On social networks? Sweet! Go ahead! No, seriously, do it!

"Nwahahahahahahahahahahaha...!" Ranta was drenched with sweat, laughing out loud as he continued his pushups.

This! Is! Bliss!

Right now, I'm standing out. Standing out like crazy.

Do you know what it's like? This feeling?

"There's a guy doing pushups at the crosswalk for some reason!" That news would spread on the social networks. Tomorrow, the kids around here would all be talking about it.

"Who is he? Who *is* he?" People would start searching for Crosswalk Pushup Man. He could decide whether to come out and say, *I am he* later, but whether he did or didn't, Isurugi Ranta would be identified as the man responsible.

The big thing wasn't that he was doing pushups at a crosswalk. No, it was that he gain a reputation as an anarchic, punk, and rock-and-roll sort of guy. That

was the impotent bit. Er, no, no. Not that. It was the important bit!

“R-Ranta-kun! Th-The light! The light!”

Monzo was shouting something again. Looking over, Ranta saw that Monzo had finished crossing. The pedestrian crossing sign was flashing now. It’d turn red soon. The majority of the pedestrians had, like Monzo, finished crossing the crosswalk. Not many people were paying attention to Ranta.

No way.

What gives?

No—The refs haven’t called this game just yet.

“Here’s where things pick up!

Oorarararararararararararararararah...!”

Ranta accelerated his pushups. The light would change soon. In short, that meant the cars would have the “go” sign, but Crosswalk Pushup Man would be in their way. Everyone would be shocked by the insanity of it, and give in. More! He was going to stand out more!

“Fwahahahahahahahahahahhhh...!”

Suddenly, a voice came from behind him. “Hey.”

“Huh?!” Ranta stopped doing pushups despite himself, and turned to look.

There was a girl from his class standing there, looking down at him.

“What’re you doin’ there, Ranta?” she asked.

“Wh-What do you mean, ‘what’...?”

Wait, it was Tachibana Yume? He didn’t recall this woman being in a position to address him by his first name, without honorifics. They weren’t anywhere near that close. They were in a relationship that was on the far side of platonic. If he were to put a name on it, they were classmates.

“I-I’m, er, uh...”

“The light’s about to change, y’know? That’s dangerous.”

“I-It’s fine! Leave me alone!”

“Hmm...” Tachibana looked like she was thinking something, but she probably wasn’t thinking at all, because she suddenly went, “Oof,” and sat down on Ranta’s back.

“Huh?! What’re getting on top of me for?! What is this?! What?!”

“Full speed ahead!”

“No, no, no?! I’m not doing that, okay?! I’m not going anywhere, obviously!”

“Well, Yume’s gonna get smushed by a car, too, then. That’s no good.”

“Then get off!”

“Yume’s not gettin’ off.”

“Why not?!”

While they were doing this, the light changed and the cars started blaring their horns.

“Ah! Ranta! Hurry, hurry! You’ve gotta cross!”

“So get off of me...”

“Yume’s not gettin’ off! Full! Speed! Ahead!”

“What is with this girl...?!”



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Grimgar of Fantasy and Ash: Volume 14+

by Ao Jyumonji

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